

Gabriel Marcel in 1918: Belief and Identity

JOSEPH GAMACHE,
Assistant Professor of Philosophy,
Department of Theology and Philosophy,
Marian University,
Indianapolis, IN.
jgamache@marian.edu

Abstract: This paper studies the 1918 entries of Gabriel Marcel's *Metaphysical Journal*. This study is situated within an argumentative reading of these entries, according to which they present a novel variety of skepticism: first-personal skepticism regarding my ability to answer the questions: *who am I* and *do I believe*. The force of this skepticism is developed at length, with particular reference to self-interpretation and the temporality of human persons. Two solutions are retrieved from Marcel's later work. It is argued that the kind of skepticism under investigation presents a natural opening onto faith. For the philosopher interested in providing such an opening, then, it is especially important to correctly describe this kind of skepticism and distinguish it from other varieties. The life and work of Marcel, who lived and surmounted this very skepticism, is therefore especially worthy of study and elucidation in service of the relationship between philosophy and faith.

"...the more it becomes a matter of what I am considered as a whole...the more the questions and even the answers lose their meaning: for instance 'Are you virtuous?' or even 'Are you courageous?' That is why at bottom it is meaningless to ask: 'Do you believe in God?'"¹

"...I do not know myself what I believe."²

"I have not a consciousness of *being* the person who is entered under the various headings thus: *son of, born at, occupation,* and so on. Yet everything I enter under these headings is strictly true."³

I. Introduction and Purposes

The first epigraph comes from Marcel's (first) *Metaphysical Journal*, kept from 1914-1923. The second is from his second metaphysical journal, published as *Being and Having*, and which was kept from 1929-1933. The third is from Marcel's Gifford Lectures, *The Mystery of Being*, given in 1949-1950. All three quotations exemplify the challenges and rewards of reading Marcel. For they seem to imply that which, at first glance, is false. Of course I am conscious of being my parents' child, born at such-and-such a place, and being a member of such-and-such an

¹ Gabriel Marcel, *Metaphysical Journal*, trans. Bernard Wall (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952), p.153, hereafter, "MJ."

² Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having* (London: Collins, 1949), p.132, hereafter "BH."

³ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Volume I: Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G. S. Fraser (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), p.84, hereafter "MB."

occupation. Of course I believe in God, and, moreover, I *know* that I believe in God. Yet Marcel, unlike other continental philosophers of similar vintage, does not relish in provoking his audience simply for the sake of provocation. There must be something to these seemingly paradoxical positions.

Questions of belief and identity animate Marcel's reflections in the *Metaphysical Journal*. They especially animate the entries (few though they are) that are written in the year 1918. Why focus on the entries from 1918? Why is this significant? The significance lies in the similarity (incomplete though it is) between the situation of the world as I write this (in 2020) and the situation of the world a century earlier when Marcel composed these entries. Then, as now, pandemic has upended the lives of individuals and nations. It is precisely this upheaval that throws into relief certain philosophical mysteries. As Marcel observes in *The Mystery of Being*:

[I]t only needs something that jolts us out of our ordinary habits, such as a serious illness, to destroy this everyday aspect; the break in habit that an illness brings with it enables us to grasp the precariousness of the everyday atmosphere of our lives which we thought of as something quite settled.⁴

In another Marcelian idiom: the assertion of certain statements (and, I would add, the asking of certain questions) carries a different "ontological weight" in different situations. For instance, when Nietzsche asserts "God is dead," it is a "terrible affirmation uttered in fear and trembling by a thinker who feels himself condemned to sacrilege," but when uttered by Sartre at the airport "it becomes a headline for the dailies...devoid of its substance."⁵

Similarly, to ask *do I believe* and *who am I* carries different "ontological weights" according to the situation. Asked in times of peace, prosperity, and good health, they seem to be matters of leisurely (some would say idle) speculation. Asked in a time when one's mortality and the precariousness of everyday life are uppermost in mind, they feel considerably weightier, the answers more pressing than any leisurely interpretation allows.

My appointed task in this paper is both to present Marcel's 1918 entries on these themes, and to offer an argumentative reading of the 1918 entries, supplemented by other works in Marcel's corpus. When I contemplate the texts in question, what emerges is a sustained argument for a special kind of skepticism about my ability to answer the questions *do I believe* and *who am I*?⁶ I think that the existence of this variety of skepticism is corroborated by the experience of many, including Marcel, who himself witnesses to this very kind of skepticism in the years prior to his conversion to Catholicism.⁷ Reflecting upon Marcel's work also affords us several responses to this kind of skepticism, and so, toward the end of this paper, we shall look at some of Marcel's later works for hints for addressing such skepticism.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.209.

⁵ Gabriel Marcel, *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp.63-64, hereafter "EBHD."

⁶ I will follow Marcel in often using first-person formulations of ideas. The reader is invited to make and consider these claims from her own first-person point of view. Also: unless otherwise noted, the question "do I believe" is to be read as "do I believe in God?"

⁷ Marcel, *BH*, p.220; and *Awakenings*, trans. Peter S. Rogers (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), p.123.

II. The Mysteriousness of Belief and Identity

Before turning to the 1918 entries in the *Metaphysical Journal*, I should say more about the mysteries that animate my paper. I use “mystery” in the sense with which Marcel uses it when he distinguishes mysteries from *problems*. In his essay, “On the Ontological Mystery,” Marcel elucidates “mystery” as a problem that encroaches upon its own data.⁸ In the *Mystery of Being*, Marcel says that a mystery is something in which I am involved, something for which the strict demarcation of *inner* and *outer* just will not do.⁹

Marcel’s reflection on the existence and multiplication of “identity forms” brings the mystery of identity into view. It is probable that a conjunction of predicates might be found that amounts to a sufficient condition for identifying *me*, as opposed to somebody else. Yet, there is also a sense in which sufficient conditions for identifying me are *unable* to identify me, for *who I am* (my identity) could not be established simply by answering the questions on a form—*son of?*, *born at?*, *occupation?*, etc.¹⁰

Questionnaires and forms solve the *problem* of the identification of (or identifying) persons. They do not “solve” the mystery of *who I am*. The mystery of identity may therefore be stated as follows: *if* answering such questionnaires cannot establish *who I am*, then *what could?* There is, moreover, a sociopolitical urgency to this mystery. For the filling-out of identification forms is a game, endemic to the world today, that we are forced to play, and which has a narrowing influence on the human person.¹¹ That is, having played the game so long, more and more persons collapse the mystery of identity into the problem of identification, and have a sense of themselves as *nothing but* the set and intersection of certain categories, of the sort that might be included on a form: name, details of birth, sex (gender),¹² race, ethnicity, occupation, etc.

Consider now the mystery of belief. That *do I believe* is mysterious may seem less obvious. In order to clarify matters, it is helpful to draw a distinction between *believing-in* and *believing-that*.¹³ Marcel says very little about propositional belief. His wonder at the mystery of belief is directed to *believing in*, the paradigm for which is *believing in God*. Thus construed, it is easier to see how it is that a person’s belief may remain mysterious to her. As Marcel writes, “I can consider the affirmation: *I believe*, and then ask myself what it is I believe in; in answering this question, I cannot be satisfied with the enumeration of a certain number of propositions which I hold to be true.”¹⁴ Sure, I may *say* that I believe *that God exists*, but to believe in God is more than that—

⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Manya Harari (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1956), p.19.

⁹ Marcel, *MB*, pp.211-212.

¹⁰ A similar distinction may be found in the work of Josiah Royce: between pragmatic identification (e.g., of myself as the account-holder by a bank teller) from identity (in terms of the coherence of my purposes and plans for life). Josiah Royce, *Metaphysics*, eds. William Ernest Hocking, Richard Hocking, and Frank Oppenheim (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), pp.150-153. Although Marcel wrote a commentary on Royce (see below), he would unfortunately not have had access to these lectures.

¹¹ Marcel, *MB*, pp.84-85.

¹² I include “gender” in parentheses not for any polemical purposes, but simply to reflect the current state of identity forms in the western world, which increasingly include both headings.

¹³ Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham University Press), p.134, hereafter “*CF*” and *The Mystery of Being: Volume II: Faith and Reality*, trans. G. S. Fraser (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), pp.77-78.

¹⁴ Marcel, *CF*, p.171.

“these propositions express something far more intimate and profound”—and the mystery is whether we can know if the more intimate and profound relation of *believing in* God is true of us.¹⁵

Notwithstanding Marcel’s focus on believing-in, I think that the mystery of belief is just as forceful when applied to some propositional beliefs, e.g., those that concern God, oneself, and other human persons. By way of anticipation: if we think that *whether I believe that p* is determined (if only in part) by certain counterfactuals (e.g., about what I would say, do, or think, in certain situations), then the question of what the relevant counterfactuals *are* and how I could *know* them to be true is one way of pressing the mysteriousness of belief even for *believing-that*.¹⁶

In other words, once we realize that, for some propositions, believing-that is bound up with *who I am*, with my identity, then the mystery of belief is revealed as part and parcel with the mystery of identity.¹⁷ For this reason (as well as for reasons of space), in what follows I will sometimes frame my discussion in terms of identity (*who am I*) and sometimes in terms of belief (*do I believe*) with the understanding that the latter may ultimately be rewritten in terms of the former as: *am I a believer*. The underlying mystery is the same, whether formulated in terms of belief or identity. While it seems, at first glance, that I know who I am and whether I believe in God, when I reach for the putative sources of evidence for this self-knowledge, I find that they are either unavailable or inadequate. How and why this is so requires us to begin now the survey of the 1918 entries.

III. Gabriel Marcel in 1918

The entries of 1918, though few in number, are tremendously fertile. In this section, I lay out Marcel’s train of thought with minimum commentary (other than clarification), before turning, in section IV, to an argumentative reading of these entries.

III.A. July 23, 1918

I begin, *in medias res*, with Marcel’s contrast between scientific knowledge and religious life:

The scientist sets the relation that binds him to the object entirely aside. Just as, when I speak of someone in the *third person*, I treat him as independent—as absent—as separate; or, more exactly, I define him implicitly as external to a dialogue that is taking place, which may be a dialogue with myself.¹⁸

The point is that “third-personal treatment” of another person treats the person thus spoken of as absent: talked *about*, but not *with* or *to*. This immediately raises the question of the circumstances under which we use the second person. We use the second person, Marcel says, whenever we

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ For one such account, see Lynne Rudder Baker, *Explaining Attitudes: A Practical Approach to the Mind* (Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.21, pp.153-159.

¹⁷ For explicit discussion of this link in Marcel, see Thomas Anderson, “The Nature of the Human Self According to Gabriel Marcel,” *Philosophy Today* 29 (1985): pp.273-282, at pp.279-281.

¹⁸ Marcel, *MJ*, p.138.

address somebody whom we regard as *able to answer*.¹⁹ Since answers are made to questions, Marcel next undertakes an analysis of *question*. Every question is or implies:

- (1) a disjunctive judgment specifying the possible alternatives (the possible answers to the question),
- (2) the affirmation that only one of the alternatives is true, and
- (3) the recognition, by the interrogator, that he (the interrogator) is unable to determine which disjunct is true.

In turn, an *answer*, to be true, must:

- (1) bear on the question (relevance),²⁰
- (2) bring the information desired, by eliminating all but one of the disjuncts supposed by the question (specification), and
- (3) be founded, not arbitrary (foundation).²¹

“Objectivity,” says Marcel, “is bound up with the existence of [such] a system of questions and answer.”²² Regardless of the skill with which a question is asked (i.e., whether formulated so as to determine an unambiguous answer), questions are given as answered in advance by *objective facts*. In other words: whenever I ask a question, I suppose its answer to be given by some fact. But the answer is receivable only through “the medium of a *thou*...by coming into communication with a wider and complementary experience.”²³

So, questions imply *answers* that are somehow related to facts (third person), but “*answerings*” that are communicated by other persons (second person). Marcel thus distinguishes between a *fact* and the *answer that bears on a fact*.²⁴ The answer *mediates between the world and the investigator*. The example of an experimental setup illustrates the more general claim: answers are derived from facts. Reality itself does not answer a scientist’s question. The answer, mediated in some way, is derived from reality.

The next question, then, is *how does reality “nourish or provoke or even permit of the answer.”*²⁵ Upon raising this question, Marcel immediately proceeds to the most difficult of test cases, that of a question about another’s private experience. Imagine a situation in which two persons (I will call them Jay and Kay) are conversing. Jay asks Kay: “Are you content?” Jay supposes, *qua* interrogator, that some objective fact answers the question, and that Kay’s answer will determine which of the disjuncts implied by the question (yes, Kay is content; no, Kay is not content) is true. Jay also supposes that Kay’s answer has the function of “liberating” or “uttering” the fact that answers his question. Lastly, Jay supposes that there is some “coincidence” between

¹⁹ At least, this is what Marcel says in *this* entry; later on, he will say that the second person treatment is less amenable to question-and-answer.

²⁰ The numbering and parenthetical labels are my own.

²¹ Or at least appear to be founded, and not arbitrary. I am not sure what to make of this. It seems acceptable only if we distinguish between *regarding an answer as true* and the answer’s *actually being true*.

²² *Ibid.*, p.140.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.142.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

his question and Kay's answer: in this case, identity of the idea of *contentedness* as it features in both the question and the answer.²⁶

Having heard the question, Kay now asks herself: Am *I* content? How will Kay answer *herself*? In asking this question, Kay requires a *thou* who will mediate between herself and the "pure experience" of *contentedness*. An infinite regress looms. Jay's knowledge about Kay's experience requires a *thou* (Kay) to mediate between the question and the fact. If Kay herself then requires a *thou* to mediate between her own question and the fact, then "how can the answer of pure experience be produced?"²⁷

The upshot of this reflection lies in the following paradox. Prior to being asked a specific question about myself, I think that any such question would be easy for me to answer. After all, I am being asked *about myself*. But once I am actually asked about myself, I find that rather the opposite is true: such questions are among the most difficult to answer. The trouble seems to arise because I am not, simply speaking, an object for myself in the way that other things (the weather, the date of Descartes' death) can be objects for me. In the language of this entry: when it comes to facts about that which is external to me, I act simply as a mediator for the fact in question. I utter the fact as answer, something facts by themselves cannot do. But when asked about myself (e.g., whether I am content)—a "pure experience"—I am more than a messenger of some part of reality. I am both mediator and that which is mediated.

This situation—identity between mediator and mediated (or mediatized)—is the very same situation found wherever persons are bound to each other by love.²⁸ It is therefore instructive, looking ahead to the next entry, to bring forward a footnote to that entry, in which Marcel speaks of self-love as being not a relation between two terms (me and myself) but rather "an undecomposable whole, namely self-intimacy or interior life."²⁹ Putting this together with the foregoing example of Jay and Kay, we begin to see why questions about myself are so difficult to answer—they require a self-intimacy and sense of myself as a whole, whereas questions that are not about me do not. In other words, self-knowledge requires self-love and integrity, neither of which are required by scientific knowledge.

III.B. August 23, 1918

The relationship between the third person and second person is further elucidated in the entry of August 23, 1918. It is here that Marcel invokes the American philosopher Josiah Royce, and in particular Royce's "triadicism." Already, a certain "triadicism" was implicit in the previous subsection. A relation with three terms is described: the speaker in a dialogue, the one spoken with/to, and that which is spoken about, but not with/to. Against this backdrop, what further idea is Marcel drawing upon in his reference to Royce?

The notion of "triadicism" is presented by Royce in *The Problem of Christianity*. There, Royce offers what he calls "interpretation," as a "mental process" or "type of knowledge" distinct

²⁶ It is this coincidence, which is recognized by the answering person, that permits the answering person to answer (the answering person, understanding the question, also understands what sort of fact is being asked for). This is how I read Marcel's insistence that "the consciousness of the answerer is the meeting ground of the question and the answer." *Ibid.*, p.139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.143.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.145.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.147.

from, and irreducible to, both the conception of universals and the perception of particulars.³⁰ Interpretation differs from conception and perception in its objects, the relation in which it stands to its objects, and its end.³¹ It is especially by reference to their different objects that Royce motivates the introduction of interpretation. For “nobody’s self is either a mere datum or an abstract conception.”³² The “self” is not simply given to itself in the way that ordinary objects in one’s environment are given to perception; neither is one’s “self” the product of abstraction from particulars. “Triadicism” is so-named because:

Interpretation always involves a relation of three terms. In the technical phrase, interpretation *is* a triadic relation. That is, you cannot express any complete process of interpreting merely by naming two terms—persons or other objects—and by telling what dyadic relation exists between one of these two and the other.³³

What, then, are the terms of interpretation? (And what are its objects?) Again Royce:

An interpretation is a relation that not only involves three terms, but brings them into a determinate order. One of the three terms is the interpreter; a second term is the object—the person or the meaning or the text—which is interpreted; the third is the person to whom the interpretation is addressed.³⁴

Two of the terms are persons, and one is the “object” interpreted: a person, meaning, or text. Earlier in his text, Royce says, more expansively, that interpretation’s object is either some mind, some mental process/activity, or the sign of some mental process/activity.³⁵ Speaking of persons instead of the “mental,” I would say that the object of interpretation is either a person, some act of a person, or some sign (usually, though not necessarily, an artifact) of a person’s activity.

A final point about Royce’s account of interpretation is relevant to understanding the August 23rd entry. The terms of interpretation may refer to the same person. So, e.g., Jay might interpret Kay to himself, so that “Jay” would be substituted for two of the terms of the interpretation-relation. At the utmost limit, Jay may even interpret *himself to himself*. In short, the terms may refer to the same person considered under different formalities: interpreter, interpreted, “interpretee.”³⁶

Returning to Marcel: reality, then, as that which is interpreted is to be treated as a *third party* to some dialogue. The dialogue Marcel has in mind, though, is the dialogue between the interpreter and the one to whom the interpretation is addressed (“interpretee”), e.g., a physicist and himself, or his assistants and collaborators, or a philosopher and other philosophers or students. It is not a dialogue between the interpreter and what is interpreted. The interpreter—e.g., an experimental physicist—probes some natural phenomenon by means of asking questions and

³⁰ Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity: Volume II* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), p.114. See also Royce, *Metaphysics*, chs. 1-3. In addition to invoking triadicism in *MJ*, Royce comments upon this aspect of Royce’s philosophy in *Royce’s Metaphysics*, trans. Virginia and Gordon Ringer (Chicago, Henry Regnery, 1956), ch. X.

³¹ Royce, *Problem of Christianity*, p.114. Of course, to call it a “type of knowledge” is to concede that all three “mental processes” have, as a generic end, the production of knowledge.

³² *Ibid.*, p.111.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.140.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.142.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.128.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.148.

designing experiments to elicit determinate answers. The phrase Marcel uses for this approach to gathering information is “pure dialectics,” and it is contrasted by Marcel with love or, more broadly, participation in the life of another. The contrast evokes Royce’s own contrast between triadic and dyadic. Love is a dyadic relation (between lover and beloved) and so differs essentially from interpretation and pure dialectics, which are triadic.³⁷

Nevertheless, from dialectics to love, a transition is possible. Marcel tells the story of two strangers on a train, making small talk. The stranger is initially a “him” with the mere form of a “thou,” as Marcel puts it. In this situation, neither person sees the other as *thou*. Rather, the strangers merely exchange statements in a shared language, and the “dialogue” at this stage is nothing but this exchange of statements and how each stranger interprets the other by way of interpreting his speech. By asking a question, receiving an answer, and then interpreting that answer for myself, I build up a “biography” of “that person” sitting across from me. But it is possible for the strangers to “cease...to be ‘somebody’ and ‘somebody else’... [and to] become simply ‘us’.”³⁸

The degree or intensity to which this transition occurs is the degree to which a dyadic relation of love has arisen between the two persons. While it may not be possible to totally desist from regarding one’s beloved as a third party, to love somebody is to cease treating her as an object of one’s speculation. My beloved “comes more and more into the circle in relation to which and outside which there are third parties, third parties who are ‘the others.’ The presence of my beloved elicits the lowering of my “interior defenses.”³⁹

Another illustration of this transition is found in *The Mystery of Being*. The example in question is of a young man attending his first formal social gathering.⁴⁰ He is very self-conscious in the “English sense” of the word referred to by Marcel in this entry—the young man is a “him” for himself, i.e., he has keenly-felt sense of himself as the object of his own and other’s (real or imagined) gazes. As Marcel puts it in a footnote to this entry of the *Metaphysical Journal*, the young man is “exterior” to himself, regarding his qualities and faults as if from the outside.⁴¹ It is only when an acquaintance of his family approaches and strikes up a conversation that the young man’s defenses are lowered, and he is no longer so self-conscious. What the presence of another as *thou* and the initiation of a second-person relation does, then, is to arrest this exteriorization of self-consciousness. In the presence of another, I am not concerned with an image of myself from the outside. I cease to be a *him* for myself to the extent that the other ceases to be a mere *her* for me. Love between persons—just as much as love within a person—involves an intimacy and shared interior life that affords another way of knowing the other, distinct from pure dialectics.

III.C. December 8, 1918

In the brief entry of December 8, Marcel considers the metaphysical implications of his distinction between pure dialectics and love. He offers a very brief argument to the conclusion that

³⁷ This raises the question, which I cannot answer here: whether and to what extent “interpretation” (in Royce) refers to the same way of knowing as “pure dialectics” (in Marcel). Some differences come readily to mind: interpretation is not so strictly tied to question-and-answer in Marcel’s defined senses, nor does interpretation seem to be so at odds with love as Marcel seems to think in *MJ*. But they are also related, insofar as pure dialectics is also triadic, and requires interpreting what is received as answer. This notwithstanding, I cautiously separate these ways of knowing in section IV.

³⁸ Marcel, *MJ*, p.146.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.147.

⁴⁰ Marcel, *MB*, p.176.

⁴¹ Marcel, *MJ*, p.146, fn 1.

“we have no right to say that [a person] A can be reduced to a grouping of answers.”⁴² In light of the previous paragraph, this can be read as an argument against the reduction of the knowledge of other persons to interpretations of their answers to questions.

How does Marcel’s argument work? Imagine a situation in which you are investigating something (*a*). You have already assigned three predicates to *a*: F, G, and H. Now suppose you ask *what a is* apart from these three predicates. This question might mean one of two things: either you are asking what other predicates (e.g. K, L, M) are predicable of *a*, or you are asking “what *a* answers to a question which is not one of the thinkable questions, that is, to an absence of question.”⁴³ The latter should be understood by reference to Marcel’s earlier analysis of “question.” That is: he is *not* claiming that we cannot ask what *a* is apart from *a*’s predicates, but rather that we cannot ask this question in such a way as to imply a determinate disjunction of the possible answers only one of which is true. The mysteries of belief and identity are precisely questions of the sort that fail to meet these conditions.

III.D. December 12, 1918: The “Vital Link”

The entry of December 12 is the break-through entry in 1918, for in it Marcel reports finding the “vital link” for his argument (and, I would add by way of anticipation, my own). The vital link is his claim that the only questions a person is capable of answering are questions that bear on information they are able to provide. To illustrate this insight, he contrasts the following pairs of questions:

What is the capital of Afghanistan?	Are you virtuous?
Do you like French beans?	Are you courageous?

The questions on the left-hand side are those the answers to which can be thought of as discrete pieces of information, which the questioned person is able to furnish: the capital of Afghanistan and whether he has a taste for French beans. I am able to answer such questions because I can serve as a mediator between the questioner and the sought-after facts.

The questions (and their respective answers) on the right-hand side, though, “lose their meaning.”⁴⁴ This loss of meaning is due to how these questions address the interrogated person as a whole. I read “loss of meaning” by reference to Marcel’s own analysis of questions and answers. A question (in this sense) is meaningful only if it implies⁴⁵ a finite disjunction of possible answers and that only one of the disjuncts is true. The meaningfulness of an answer depends upon its relevance (does it address the question), specification (does it say which disjunct is true), and foundation (some objective fact). Questions that regard the whole of a person tend to lose their meaning insofar as they do not specify a determinate disjunction of answers and cannot be satisfied by a definite “yes” to one of the disjuncts. A question such as “do you believe” is one that fails to meet this disjunctive test.⁴⁶

The implications of the “meaninglessness” of asking another person whether she believes in God are drawn as follows:

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.148.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.147.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ “Suggests” may better make Marcel’s point.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.153.

- (1) I cannot really know whether another person believes in God.
 (2) [Given that my inner dialogue is like a dialogue between persons]: I cannot really know whether I believe in God.

Generalizing, Marcel distinguishes between global questions (which address the person as a whole) and what he calls “detailed” questions. I will refer to the latter as “local” questions. They presuppose the interrogated person as merely a set of predicates. The former address the person as a whole—hence “global.” When I question myself about *who I am* and *do I believe* I think of myself as myself and hence as a whole.⁴⁷ To the extent, Marcel adds, that “a reality is treated as a whole, it transcends the course of thought that proceeds by question and answer”—only a dyadic relation of participation (preeminently: love) is possible.⁴⁸ This is precisely the case with the mysteries of belief and identity. Belief, Marcel says to conclude this entry, cannot be reduced to a relation of a subject to an object.⁴⁹ Ultimately, these mysteries are united: for whether I believe is not simply a characteristic that I *have* but is rather a “mode of being.”⁵⁰ So *who I am* includes *do I believe*.

IV. An Argumentative Reading of the 1918 Entries

I now leave off straightforward discussion of passages from the entries of 1918 in order to show how these passages unfold a distinctive variety of skepticism for knowledge of who I am and whether I believe.

IV.A. “Who am I” and “What do I believe?” Are Global Questions

The first point to reinforce is that the “questions” associated with the mysteries of belief and identity are unlike questions in the sense analyzed by Marcel in the entry of July 23. This distinction—between “questions” (in scare-quotes) and questions (no scare-quotes), or between what Marcel calls “unthinkable” and “thinkable” questions—I refer to as the distinction between *global* questions that address the interrogated person as a whole and *local* questions that seek to elicit a particular matter of fact about the person. Marcel, we saw, also refers to the latter as “detailed” questions.

The purpose of this distinction is to highlight the way in which *answers* to global questions are unlike answers to local questions. Unlike local questions, which seek to elicit a piece of information or fact about (and from) the interrogated party (a detail, we might say), and are accordingly asked with varying degrees of precision in order to elicit an answer that is unambiguous in the fact it presents, global questions are addressed to the whole of a person, or to the person as a whole. It is on account of this that global questions are mysterious.

IV.B. Global Questions Are Not Answerable by Pure Dialectics

That *global questions are not answerable by pure dialectics* follows from two parts of Marcel’s analysis of questions and answers of the sort exchanged in pure dialectics. The first is

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ For the relation between participation and love, see Pietro Prini, “A Methodology of the Unverifiable,” in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, eds. Paul Arthur Schlipp and Lewis Edwin Hahn (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1984), pp.205-239, at p.218.

⁴⁹ Marcel, *MJ*, p.156.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.153.

that questions answerable by pure dialectics presuppose the existence of a fact which supplies the answer. Asked as a question of pure dialectics, “are you content,” presupposes that there is a fact of the matter—either it is a fact that you are content, or it is a fact that you are not content. It is the task of the answerer to serve as a mouthpiece for the fact in question.

The second part of Marcel’s analysis that is relevant here is that there must be some coincidence between question and answer that occurs in the mind of the answering person. In order for a question to be answerable by pure dialectics, the question must be formulated and received by the interrogated person in such a way that the answering person understands (and can then search for) the sought-after fact.⁵¹

That these presuppositions break down in the face of global questions, especially the mysteries of belief and identity, is how we get to skepticism. Is there such a particular fact of the matter *that I believe in God*? If so, is it the sort of fact I could know, whose presence “in me” I could simply detect? To clarify the concern, consider Marcel’s discussion in *Being and Having* of the paradox of not knowing what we believe.⁵² Considered as items on an inventory, it seems that we should be able to enumerate our beliefs, for instance by writing up an inventory of propositions that we believe or listing a number of persons, causes, or ideologies *in which* we believe. Thus construed, the interrogator is asking me to consult this inventory—among the propositions listed there, do I find <God exists>?

It seems that I cannot simply detect such a fact as the presence of such a proposition on my “inventory,” even if such a fact exists. Recall the pairs of questions contrasted by Marcel in the entry of December 12. I can simply detect that I have brown hair. I can quickly recall that Kabul is the capital of Afghanistan. Thinking about French beans, I immediately (since I have eaten them) know that I have a taste for them. There is an immediacy—the relevant fact shows up when elicited and I simply mediate between the fact (which cannot speak) and my interrogator who seeks the fact. When I seriously ask myself whether I believe in God, though, no such fact simply shows up—or, if one does, its immediacy is “suppressed.” For even though an affirmative answer may emerge, the matter strikes me as too serious to admit of such “lazy” immediacy.⁵³ For, to raise but one challenge, have I not lived in a way that is sometimes at odds with what I just said I believe?

It is difficult to see how, for the vast run of persons, “do you believe,” is anything but what William James called a “live option.”⁵⁴ And if live, then it is hard to see how we simply know the answer to the question by knowing the fact sought by the interrogator. If Marcel is right, then when somebody asks me “do you believe,” I then ask myself, “do I believe?” And when I ask myself this question, I touch so nearly upon myself as a whole that I cannot simply find that particular part or state of me that is my belief.

Perhaps, though, this is not so worrisome. For it seems that the view we are groping toward is that, in order to answer this global question, we need to engage in something like an interpretation of ourselves. In other words, reading along with Marcel, perhaps Roycean interpretation—the “triadicism” of the August 23 entry—supplies this lacuna in our knowledge.

⁵¹ Another way of making this point is Sam Keen’s observation that insofar as we proceed by pure dialectics, “the object is forced to submit to the question and categories that reflect the aim and purpose of the questioner.” Sam Keen, *Gabriel Marcel* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1967), p.18.

⁵² Marcel, *BH*, p.133.

⁵³ I do not deny that, for some (e.g., some saints) the immediacy in question is neither suppressed nor lazy.

⁵⁴ That is, in this context, we can take seriously both the possibility that we believe, and that we do not believe. William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *Selected Papers on Philosophy*, ed. Ernest Rhys (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1935), pp.100-102.

IV.C. *Some Global Questions Are Not Answerable by Roycean Interpretation*

An interpretation, however, requires something to be interpreted—some raw material. For Royce, the raw materials for interpretation are the activities (internal or external) of persons, and the signs thereof (e.g., artifacts, such as texts, works of art, technology, and speech). For example, consider another of Marcel’s global questions: *are you virtuous?* I ask myself “am I virtuous?” and now I suppose that interpretation is required in order to answer the question. What will serve as raw material for my interpretation, and what will govern my selection thereof? I might begin by assuming that external actions are the best indicators of virtue. Which of my external actions will I select? The selection will be governed by the end of interpretation, which in this case is to acquire knowledge of whether I am virtuous. But herein lies the difficulty: I may begin by implicitly assuming that I am virtuous. I then gather evidence which favors that interpretation. If I am honest, and recognize what I have done, I may then be alert to episodes of my life in which I acted viciously. I may then interpret the vicious moments as derogations from the “true me,” or the virtuous moments as derogations from the “true me.”⁵⁵ If I am comprehensive enough in the survey I take of my actions, and even if I set aside obvious outliers, the resulting confusion makes it difficult to lay claim to *knowing* whether I am virtuous. All of this before I begin to scrutinize my interpretation of the actions themselves—e.g., my interpretation of an act of giving money to a panhandler as charitable, rather than as an attempt at assuaging a guilty conscience.

Return now to the question “*do you believe?*” What raw material strikes us as most applicable to that question? Likely candidates include certain external actions (e.g., church attendance, prayer, charitable works, the public recitation of creeds or other acts of testimony). Internal experiences come to mind as well: the interior experience of participating in a liturgy, mental prayer, experiences which we describe as *of God* or *of grace*. But then you remember moments of viciousness, sin, denial, doubt, and apathy. Which is the norm; which the exception? Do I believe, and occasionally (or often) act as if I do not? Or do I merely think (or trick myself into thinking) that I believe – and the majority of my internal and external experiences testify to this? A fall from grace? – or a hard awakening from a consoling fantasy?⁵⁶

Again, the worry is not that nobody knows. It is rather that, for many, the immediacy with which any answer is given is suppressed and the interpreting self uncovers a mess of conflicting raw material. The point applies not just to the person who thinks, but is then (or should be) unsure, of his belief—but also to the person who thinks, but should be unsure, of his unbelief.⁵⁷ Taking into account my whole person—which global questions compel me to do—is it so obvious that I believe?

IV.D. *Global Questions and One’s Present and Future*

⁵⁵ Marcel saw his drama (and situations from his own life) as recognizing this “irremediable ambiguity of the concrete given.” Marcel, *Awakenings*, p.52, p. 205.

⁵⁶ Marcel’s plays provide many examples of the ambiguity that arises in the midst of conflicting interpretations. An exemplary case is the character Claude Lemoyne from “A Man of God,” in Gabriel Marcel, *3 Plays*, trans. Marjorie Gabain (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), pp.35-114. Closer to the year 1918 is the character Moirans, whose beliefs may be subject also to a thicket of conflicting interpretations. (This play was written in 1913.) See Gabriel Marcel, “The Sandcastle,” trans. Maria Traub, in *The Invisible Threshold*, eds. Brendan Sweetman, Maria Traub, and Geoffrey Karabin (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2019), pp.151-263.

⁵⁷ Marcel thought of his aunt, the woman who cared for him after the death of his mother, as such a case. See Marcel, *Awakenings*, p.150.

There is, however, another source of trouble, even if the immediate answer does not get snowed under by countervailing considerations: *time*. To approach the concern about time, let me begin by saying that global questions, in addressing the person as a whole, do so not only with regard to the whole person at a particular time. Nor do they approach merely the whole person at a particular time, together with the entirety of her past. Rather, they address the whole person as “having” both a past and a future.

That this is so should be especially clear with respect to the mysteries of identity (who am I?) and belief (what do I believe?). Take the latter first. I ask myself this question. Suppose that an affirmative answer springs immediately to mind. Suppose, further, that it is not undermined by subsequent reflection about myself—past or present. Now, I consider the future. In the midst of the pandemic, I contemplate the possibility that a friend of mine perishes, her life cut short abruptly and tragically. Under these circumstances, would I still believe in God? ⁵⁸ Perhaps, for some persons, the answer immediately comes to mind: yes, I would believe still, or no, I would lose faith. But, as with the argument of the previous subsection, I contend that, for many if not for most, these questions would be difficult to answer.

Nor – and here’s the rub – does Roycean interpretation fare much better. For there is no raw material about the future which can serve as input for interpretation. My interpretation as to whether I believe is supported by my present and past—but whether *I believe* is equally a matter of how I comport myself into the future. This reference to the future in the context of skeptical worries naturally calls to mind the riddles of induction. It may be fruitful, then, for bringing out the temporal dimension of the kind of skepticism under consideration to compare it with Nelson Goodman’s “new riddle” of induction and Saul Kripke’s reading of the new riddle as suggestive of a novel kind of skepticism.

Goodman’s riddle introduced philosophy to the predicate “grue” and the idea of “gruesome” predicates. The predicate *grue* “applies to all things examined before *t* just in case they are green but to other things just in case they are blue.”⁵⁹ So, with respect to a batch of emeralds you have examined before *t*, the predictions that *all emeralds will turn out to be green* and *all emeralds will turn out to be grue* are “alike confirmed by evidence statements describing the same observations.”⁶⁰ Saul Kripke’s skeptical reading takes Goodman’s “grue” paradox and reads it as follows: “Why not predict that grass, which has been grue in the past, will be grue in the future?” He contrasts this with his novel and (supposedly Wittgensteinian) skepticism about meaning: “Who is to say that in the past I didn’t mean grue by ‘green’, so that now I should call the sky, not the grass, ‘green’.”⁶¹

Apart from whether Kripke’s reading of Goodman and Wittgenstein is correct, ⁶² it dramatizes for us the skepticism I am describing in this paper. Might there be various “gruesome” versions of believing? Not knowing how I will bear up in the future (under various losses, temptations, and persecutions), might I question whether I should interpret myself as a believer (in

⁵⁸ Marcel engages in this sort of reflection, albeit with a different example. *Ibid.*, pp.180-185.

⁵⁹ Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 4th edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p.74.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p.58.

⁶² For the analogy between Kripke and Goodman, see Ian Hacking, “On Kripke’s and Goodman’s Uses of ‘Grue’” *Philosophy* 68 (1993): pp.269-295.

the usual sense) as opposed to a “believer*” where a believer*⁶³ is somebody who believes just in case he is not persecuted on account of his faith and is an apostate otherwise, or somebody who is a believer (in the usual sense) just in case he remains in the middle class and is an apostate otherwise, or...? The reader is invited to supply any number of conditions that might be slotted into this schema instead of freedom from persecution or maintaining a certain socioeconomic status. If we can feel the forcefulness of this worry, might we not then look back and wonder about how we interpret our pasts? In parallel with Kripke: ought we perhaps *not* to have interpreted ourselves as believers in the past, so that examining ourselves and our pasts now, ought we likewise not call ourselves “believers” but “believers*?”

While circuitous, the detour through Kripke is not gratuitous. For as we shall see, the sort of concerns raised by Kripke are not completely foreign to those of Marcel, so that the special kind of skepticism I am articulating here may be situated alongside other distinctively twentieth-century skepticisms. To see the similarities and press my argument further, I now turn to how this skeptical worry arises in the context of the mystery of identity. Assume, for purposes of discussion, Marcel’s claim that an answer to the question *who am I?* invokes my fidelity—that to whom or to what I am faithful.⁶⁴

Fidelity is essentially future-oriented. Whether you are faithful to another is not simply a function of what you do in the here-and-now, but what you will do in the future, or what you would do under different future conditions. In a work that unites consideration of both mysteries of belief and identity, Marcel invokes the image of a “mental autopsy” to press worries similar to those I have expressed.⁶⁵ You cannot simply know, by peering inside yourself at a given time or interpreting yourself at a given time (even including memories of your past) whether you believe and who you are. Marcel writes:

But the notion of a mental autopsy reveals its absurdity in the measure that we are concerned with exhibiting the more fundamental modes of personal existence, with determining, for example, what feeling the defunct had for some of his relations, or what his religious convictions were at the moment of his death. These snapshots can only capture an immediacy which has to be evaluated in terms of a larger whole which is actually indeterminate.⁶⁶

Marcel continues with the following example:

Imagine a man who during a perhaps trivial quarrel, declares to his wife that she is a nuisance, that he can’t stand her any longer; these are his last words, for he is struck by an automobile a few minutes later. Should or can the outburst of violent emotion to which he succumbed be considered as the definitive state of his feelings for his wife? It is impossible to say. A host of possibilities and considerations will crowd in on anyone who wished to

⁶³ The asterisk here is not simply a naming convention of the “analytic style” but suggests, as with normal uses of asterisks (e.g., on pill bottles) that there are qualifications or strings-attached.

⁶⁴ Marcel, *CF*, ch. 8; *MB*, ch. 8.

⁶⁵ Marcel, *CF*, p.161.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

decide the issue...all of this illustrates a general truth: the personality infinitely transcends what we may call its snapshot states.⁶⁷

Among the “possibilities and considerations,” are, I assume, facts about what the husband would have done, said, or thought, had he not been struck down. This example brings home that we cannot simply assume that the relevant facts about the future are like breadcrumbs that we will continue to pick up. Whether we believe—whether we are faithful—and, by extension, who we are, depends upon facts which we may not know, and which perhaps we cannot know, if only because they concern a future that will not come to pass.

In the same work, Marcel also discusses the inherent instability of the raw material for any such future-oriented interpretation. He considers two sources of evidence for such an interpretation (of ongoing fidelity)—our past (and present) feelings and our dispositions. I cannot infer, from the fact that I felt a certain way in the past, that I will continue to feel that way in the future. In support of this claim, Marcel gives the example—with which many can relate—of visiting an invalid, feeling pity during the visit, and, in the midst of that feeling and motivated by it, making a promise to pay a return visit.⁶⁸ When the time for the return visit comes, I no longer feel the same way and find myself saddled with a promise which I cannot fulfill without “simulating” the feeling in question.⁶⁹ To complicate matters, the return visit coincides with a social event to which I have since been invited. While I thought, at the time the promise was made, that I would not break faith, and that if the thought of renegeing “*does* flash through my mind; I [would] dismiss it [and] should dismiss it, I now know that I was wrong.”⁷⁰ Looking back, should I interpret myself as having been faithful *at the time*, or should I instead interpret myself as having been, all along, faithful in a “gruesome” way: faithful if not enticed by a conflicting invitation, faithless otherwise. Or: faithful if still feeling pity, but faithless otherwise. Looking ahead, with respect to those promises or other commitments to which I currently hold fast: should this not induce in me a certain “existential skepticism”⁷¹ that my current commitments, in virtue of which I understand who I am, will themselves turn out to be gruesome?

The concern holds even if we supplement feelings with “inner dispositions.”⁷² For, as Marcel implies, we are aware, even as we make promises or other commitments, that dispositions can change.⁷³ Again, there are parallels with Kripke’s work on Wittgenstein, and similar attempts to surmount skepticism about meaning by appealing to the dispositions of speakers. The relevant point is that, from the finitude of our past performances, we cannot say what we would do for all possible future states of affairs. Kripke writes:

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.161-162. For discussion of these texts in terms of Marcel’s critique of “instantaneism” as a philosophy of time, see John V. Vigorito, “On Time in the Philosophy of Marcel,” in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, eds. Paul Arthur Schlipp and Lewis Edwin Hahn (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1984), pp. 392-393. For a relevant example from Marcel’s drama, see “A Mystery of Love,” in Gabriel Marcel, *Ghostly Mysteries*, 17-100, trans. by K.R. Hanley (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004).

⁶⁸ Marcel, *CF*, p.159; *BH*, pp.47ff.

⁶⁹ Marcel, *CF*, p.160.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.159.

⁷¹ A skepticism is existential if it concerns one’s very being and self-experience. Kripke’s reading of Goodman is an existential skepticism. Hacking, “On Kripke’s and Goodman’s,” p.290, p.292.

⁷² Marcel, *CF*, p.158.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 158-159.

The dispositionalist attempts to avoid the problem of the finiteness of my actual past performance by appealing to a disposition. But in doing so, it ignores an obvious fact: not only my actual performance, but also the totality of my dispositions, is finite.⁷⁴

My dispositions (and feelings) being finite (Kripke), and mutable (Marcel), my access to my own future tenuous—these concerns together induce a two-pronged skepticism about belief and identity. Since belief and identity—bound together in Marcel by fidelity—are future-oriented, I lack what I need in order to know what I believe and who I am; and since my present is equally a future with respect to my past: I have not far to look to find examples of past interpretations of myself that were false. Thus is skepticism brought on both by the unknown and the known.⁷⁵

IV.E. *The problem of credentials*

A final thread remains to be pulled upon. All of the foregoing reflections are conducted on the presupposition that it is I who attempt to interpret myself, in order to answer the questions of belief and identity. Marcel contends, though, that to do this betrays “an ulterior motive [that] there is a more fundamental question that I want to ask myself: it is this, ‘Am I qualified to answer this question’?”⁷⁶

We often, then, turn to others for enlightenment. We ask the question “who I am” (or “what do I believe”) not to ourselves, but *of ourselves to* another person. Describing something similar in the 1918 entries of the *Metaphysical Journal*, Marcel says that, among the functions of second-person discourse is to illuminate what is “him/it” in me, to bring to my own conscious awareness that which is true of me, but of which I am not sure.⁷⁷ The trouble though, as Marcel notes, is that the problem of credentials hounds us even when we turn to others. For given that I have chosen whom to ask, is it not I who have bestowed credentials on the other person? If I have called into doubt my own credentials, ought I not also doubt the credentials of the person I have chosen?⁷⁸ And if I turn myself over to an answer supplied simply by the social groups to which I belong, do I not lose sight of the very mystery of identity—do I not end up by surrendering myself to the “identity forms” that so vexed Marcel, and become naught by a filled-out questionnaire?⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Kripke, *On Wittgenstein*, p.26.

⁷⁵ Still another source of consternation, though one not discussed as a kind of skepticism, may be found in Baker’s work on belief, namely: how do we even know what dispositions (and counterfactual statements expressing those dispositions linguistically) are relevant to determining whether/what we believe? See Lynne Rudder Baker, “Belief Ascription and the Illusion of Depth,” *Facta Philosophica* 5 (2001): pp.183-201, at p.186. Similar concerns are raised by H.H. Price, another advocate of a dispositional account of belief, who notes that we are not the privileged knowers of what we believe; see H.H. Price, *Belief* (New York: Humanities Press, 1960), p.249.

⁷⁶ Marcel, *MB*, p.148; *CF*, p.67.

⁷⁷ Marcel, *MJ*, p.157.

⁷⁸ Marcel, *MB*, pp.148-149.

⁷⁹ For discussion of the worries about credentials in terms of searching for a criterion of truth without oneself, see David Oyler, “Proofs for the Existence of God in Gabriel Marcel’s Concrete Philosophy,” *The Modern Schoolman* 56 (1979), p.226.

V. Resolutions in Marcel⁸⁰

In the previous section I offered a reading of Marcel, rooted in the *Metaphysical Journal* entries of 1918, in which we are confronted with a unique kind of skepticism: *I do not know what I believe. I do not know who I am.* The mysteries of belief and identity, when translated into their associated global questions, address me as a whole, in such a way that I am stunned into confusion and silence.

The kind of skepticism I have presented is not skepticism with respect to whether God exists, or whether any point of doctrine regarding God is true or knowable. The skeptic who is unsure of what he believes—or whether, by way of uniting the mysteries of belief and identity, he *is* a believer—is not necessarily someone who thinks that knowledge of God is unattainable. Rather, such a skeptic may be described using Marcel’s portrayal of the third kind of unbeliever in his 1934 lecture, “Some Thoughts on Faith,” printed in *Being and Having*:

Last of all comes the case, more frequent than most people imagine, of the unbeliever who regards faith as a real communion with a higher reality for the man who has it, but confesses that this reality is unfortunately not revealed to him.⁸¹

As I have already noted, in this very address Marcel confesses to having fallen under just such a description prior to his reception into the Roman Catholic Church in 1929. This illustrates that the skepticism I have been discussing is surmountable. Marcel himself reports having overcome it. In what remains, then, I present some solutions of the skepticism I have proposed. Just as the type of skepticism was developed from Marcel’s text, so too will I appeal to Marcel for solutions.

Before turning to solutions, however, two points must be made, the first lest it be thought that the foregoing skepticism was set up as so many bowling pins to be knocked over. There is a value in the sort of skepticism I have described. Throughout this paper, my example has been that of a person who is inclined at first to answer that she is a believer, but for whom this immediate response is then suppressed under further consideration. But just as equally does this skepticism apply to the person who is inclined to say that she is *not* a believer, but for whom this immediate response is then called into question. It follows that one value of the type of skepticism I have described is that it allows for people to discover their faith.⁸²

The second preliminary concerns the kind of solution being offered. I am not proposing what Kripke calls a “skeptical solution.” As Hacking concisely describes this kind of solution, it is one in which the “last word” about the object of skepticism is something “external to the object of analysis.”⁸³ I think that it is precisely such a solution that Marcel would abhor when applied to the mysteries of belief and identity. For it is precisely by stepping outside the experience of faith,

⁸⁰ To review the mainsprings of the skepticism I have just been describing. These are (1) the absence of discrete facts (or subpersonal states) that would furnish straightforward answers to global questions; (2) the temporality of global questions, i.e., even if we grant that the answers are supplied by interpretation, we both lack the necessary raw material for interpretation and have reasons to doubt our interpretations; (3) the realization that we cannot answer these questions on our own, but equally that others ultimately depend upon us for their credentials.

⁸¹ Marcel, *BH*, p.220.

⁸² Certainly, it allowed for Marcel to find his own faith. Relationships with persons espousing such skepticism can itself facilitate the skeptic’s discovery of faith. Marcel says about personal encounters, such as the one that precipitated his conversion: “the virtue of such encounters is to rouse the inattentive to a reflection or return upon themselves, to make them say, ‘Am I really sure that I don’t believe?’” *Ibid.*, p.227.

⁸³ Hacking, “On Kripke’s and Goodman’s...” p.276.

and substituting something else in its place, that traditional religious skepticism (again, not the sort I have presented) arises.⁸⁴

There are several places in Marcel's corpus to which we could look for a solution. The first is advanced in the aforementioned address, "Some Thoughts on Faith," which Marcel gave five years after his conversion. Speaking of his earlier uncertainty with respect to whether he was a believer, Marcel says that to accept that *others* believe (as he admits he did) was already to have journeyed far along the path of knowing that he was a believer himself. "The fact is that when we have already come as far as this, we are in an open or expectant state of mind which either implies faith or is faith."⁸⁵ This echoes a statement made in 1918: "from the moment that I believe *in* the belief [of others] I believe *with* the someone else."⁸⁶ Thus, the first stage⁸⁷ is an awakening to the implications of the kind of skepticism one is experiencing.

To this recognition of the natural opening onto faith, the second stage adds the realization that faith is a "silent invitation" to which one is called, but not coerced, to make a response.⁸⁸ In other words, the skeptic realizes that faith is not something "out there" that needs to be found or seized, nor is faith something that is inexplicably bestowed upon or revealed to a fortunate few but not to the skeptic. This is connected with the realization—an insight repeated time and again in Marcel's corpus—that with respect to the mysterious, the line dividing "inner" from "outer" loses its meaning. In this context, it is the insight that God is also inward—"more inward to me than I can be to myself." The skeptic realizes, in other words, that God has always been here. Once illuminated by these twin insights all that may remain (if anything remains) is another person, a human witness to faith, to come along and knock over the first domino, as it were.⁸⁹ This was the case in Marcel's own journey.⁹⁰

Perhaps the best image to encapsulate this approach to the skeptic is to evoke Marcel's phrase "the invisible threshold."⁹¹ The skeptic who has had his kind of skepticism fully explained, and its connections to his own faith and the faith of others revealed, who realizes what faith really means for the believer, stands at a threshold. Ultimately, the alternatives are to accept the invitation to enter—an invisible invitation from God made visible by human witnesses—or not.⁹²

A second way of resolving skepticism consists in what Marcel calls an appeal to the absolute Thou, or the absolute Recourse. This response is especially apt in addressing the concerns about credentials raised in section IV.E. Marcel writes:

⁸⁴ Marcel, *BH*, pp.223-226.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.220.

⁸⁶ Marcel, *MJ*, p.153. This is contrasted with the situation of the traditional skeptic, who does not believe in the belief of others insofar as he "misinterprets the belief as an existential judgment that is mistaken." *Ibid.*, pp.153-154; see *BH*, p.225, where the traditional skeptic is criticized for operating with a "caricature" of faith.

⁸⁷ "Stage" is used simply for organizational purposes; the way out of skepticism is hardly reducible to a technique.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.226.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.227.

⁹⁰ Marcel, *Awakenings*, p.124.

⁹¹ *Le Seuil Invisible*—the title of a publication containing two early plays of 1913 (*Grace* and *The Sandcastle*) (see fn 56). Seymour Cain reads *Grace* as expressing "in some measure the concerns of the young Marcel—an unbeliever who is waiting on Grace, envious of other people's faith, struggling for what he loves and reveres despite a harmful skeptical education." Seymour Cain, *Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Hillary House), p.22.

⁹² Under these conditions, Marcel is clear that such a refusal can only be interpreted as pride and refusal, someone whose skepticism eventually bottoms out in "I will not believe." Marcel, *BH*, p.227.

[I]f the question ‘who am I?’ is not merely thrust out of the way...it is transformed into an appeal sent out *beyond* the circle of those associates of mine in whom, before I reach the stage of reflection, I thought I recognized the right to judge me...toward one who can only be described as an absolute Thou, a last and supreme resource for the troubled human spirit.⁹³

Our last recourse, then, if we are afflicted by skepticism about whether we are believers is to make an appeal for illumination from beyond. But this “beyond” is, as the insight of the previous response indicates, also within the skeptic. It is the previous response that militates against an interpretation of the absolute appeal as a proof of the existence of God on the basis of the skeptic’s having made a sincere appeal to the absolute Thou.⁹⁴ In this way, both responses I have discussed interact with each other. An appeal that proceeded on the basis of a caricature of faith and the notion that God is somewhere “out there” to be found makes the appeal seem as though it were an SOS signal, from which is inferred the existence of a receiving station.⁹⁵ But of course, we cannot infer a receiver from the mere fact of having broadcast the signal. So too the appeal, divorced from the insights concerning faith mentioned above, is bound to seem foolish to the skeptic. Yet in light of those insights into faith, it promises to be, like the encounter with human witnesses, the moment in which the skeptic crosses the invisible threshold.

When I reflect upon this appeal, made on the ground of these insights, what comes to mind is the following pair of conditional statements:

- (1) If I believe in You, then You (God) know it.
- (2) If I do not believe in You, then You (God) know that, too.

I cannot know on my own whether I believe. Such knowledge rests with certainty in God alone, for faith if it exists can only be received as a gift. “As the soul approaches more nearly to faith, and becomes more conscious of the transcendence of her object, she perceives more and more clearly that she is utterly incapable of producing this faith, of spinning it out of her own substance.”⁹⁶ It should come, then, as no surprise that at the end of the skeptical journey, one realizes that all along there was a certain truth to this variety of skepticism after all—not that one’s status as believer cannot be known *simpliciter*, but that it cannot be known by the person as if it were something that could be simply detected as a state of her soul or brain, or woven as an interpretation of behavior—in a word, as if she herself were the author and giver of faith and not the recipient.

Furthermore, these conditions bring home how faith does not lie entirely within us, but lies in God. Or, as Marcel puts it, the very “distinction between internal and external...outside and inside vanish as soon as faith comes on the scene.”⁹⁷ I am led to regard my faith as both outside myself (in God) but also “within myself, more inward to me than I am to myself.” This cannot but

⁹³ Marcel, *MB*, p.152; see *BH*, p.135, *CF*, p.67.

⁹⁴ See Kenneth Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962), pp.125-127, who reads Marcel as providing us with a new “ontological argument,” a “proof” or “inference” (not in the standard conceptual sense) in which to assume that we could verify whether somebody is receiving the appeal, out of our own resources, is to step outside the appeal. Cain similarly reminds us that basic agreement on “values” is required in order for any “proof” to be efficacious; see Cain, *Gabriel Marcel*, 105ff.

⁹⁵ Marcel, *CF*, p.179.

⁹⁶ Marcel, *BH*, p.226.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.225.

evoke the words of Augustine: “Yet all the time You were more inward than the most inward place of my heart and loftier than the highest.”⁹⁸

There is a wonderful liberation in this, and to be thus liberated is to receive the answer you were after all along. As Marcel says in the much earlier entry of March 12, 1914:

I saw for the first time this morning...in what way our belief transcends all that we know of it. That is why I feel so embarrassed and uneasy when I am asked whether I believe. There is nothing on which one can *interrogate* or *answer*. As soon as my belief descends into knowledge it seems to negate itself—and yet it reaffirms itself beyond the negation of itself.⁹⁹

And as he would put it much later: “Who I am? You alone really know me and judge me; to doubt You is not to free myself but to annihilate myself.”¹⁰⁰

VI. Conclusion

To review: following Marcel through the 1918 entries of the *Metaphysical Journal* has brought to light a new kind of skepticism. It is not the traditional skepticism that says: *No human being knows (or can know) whether God exists*. It is not even this same skepticism rendered in the first-person as: *I do not (or cannot) know whether God exists*. It is rather a skepticism that says: *I do not know whether I believe in God*. This is the mysteriousness of belief. It is also bound up with the mysteriousness of identity. For insofar as my fundamental beliefs partially constitute *who I am*, the question *do I believe* is: *am I a believer?*

The articulation of this novel skepticism affords philosophers the resources to describe experiences which, previously, may have been described in terms of traditional skepticism. If philosophy opens onto faith, as for Marcel it did, this is important. For an incomplete account of the varieties of skepticism implies a lack of resources for inter-personal dialogue between those who consider themselves believers and those who do not consider themselves believers. For example, if all skepticism is reduced to agnosticism, then we get an emphasis on proofs for the existence of God and apologetics. But what somebody in Marcel’s own position needed was not proof or apologetics. He needed somebody simply to recognize the position he was in and ask him why he didn’t consider himself a believer. The importance of discerning the skeptical situation in each person for understanding the relationship between believers and skeptics can be summed up no better than by Marcel:

We shall understand nothing of the relation between the believer and the non-believer and there is danger of giving the most harmfully pharisaic interpretation of it if we fail to perceive something else which is even more mysterious, namely the symbiosis of belief and disbelief in the same soul. If the believer has any duty at all, it is to become aware of all that is within him of the non-believer.¹⁰¹

3.6.11. ⁹⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* (2nd Edition), trans. F. J. Sheed, ed. Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006),

⁹⁹ Marcel, *MJ*, p.92.

¹⁰⁰ Marcel, *CF*, p.145.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.121.

To return, at the very end, to the theme of 1918 and 2020: the generalized uncertainty of these times is fertile ground for skepticism in all its forms. In the west, increasing belief in the power of experts to save us (a dogmatic technocracy) and skepticism in the very possibility of expertise (anti-intellectualism) are on the march together. Making explicit the varieties of skepticism and dogmatism is an essential task for philosophy, and the study and emulation of Marcel is a worthy preparation for that work.