

## **Marcel on Philosophy and Evil: Existential Mysteries and Philosophical Problems**

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*Abstract:* This article is concerned with the existential and philosophical dimensions of human existence in the existentialist tradition, particularly in the work of Marcel, and with special attention to the topic of evil and suffering. Part I begins with some reflections on the existentialist approach to philosophy, especially the understanding of philosophy as a vocation. Part II turns to Marcel's approach to the existential experience of evil, and a discussion of its implications for philosophy of religion and theodicy. Part III then examines Marcel's views on these matters critically in order to probe his view further, to get to the root of his dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy of religion, and to examine carefully whether or not this dissatisfaction is justified.

### **I: The Existentialist Approach to Philosophy**

Philosophers in the existentialist tradition of the twentieth century, including Marcel, have usually been associated with the idea that philosophy is something of a personal quest, and, as such, it differs from other disciplines and areas of inquiry, such as, for example, psychology, law, or the sciences. The outlook that philosophy is a personal quest has a more specific meaning for these philosophers, however. Philosophical questioning, they maintain, involves in a profound, personal way *the person who is doing the questioning*. This is the way Marcel puts the point, but it can be found in the work of any number of existentialist thinkers. A "search or investigation, some term implying the notion of a quest, is the most adequate description that can be applied to the essential direction of philosophy," he notes, adding that, "philosophy will always...be an aid to discovery rather than a matter of strict demonstration."<sup>1</sup> Marcel holds that, even when engaged in philosophical reflection, we should always remain focused on the fact that our condition is that of a traveler (*homo viator*) on an *existential* journey, which is founded on an *experiential* dimension, and which is expressed primarily through ethical and intersubjective relationships (which may occasionally evoke an experience of the transcendent). He even goes so far as to suggest that a true philosophical inquiry is a vocation, springing from the urgent inner need of a person and there is an irreducible quality about the truth it seeks.<sup>2</sup> "No concrete philosophy," he observes, "is possible without a constantly renewed yet creative tension between the I and those depths of our being in and by which we are; nor without the most stringent and rigorous reflection, directed on our most intensely lived experience."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. 1, trans. by G.S. Fraser (Chicago: Regnery, 1951), pp.1-2 (hereinafter *MBI*).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Creative Fidelity*, trans. R. Rosthal (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1964), p.65 (hereinafter *CF*).

It is necessary to probe further into what it means to say that one is “involved in a question.” We might approach the matter in this way: in a university course on business ethics, for instance, a common ethical situation presented for reflection involves individuals stealing from the company they work for, by inflating expense accounts, embezzlement, accepting bribes, abusing pension funds, and any other number of ways. Students are usually asked to identify the ethical issues the case presents, discern where an individual went wrong, explain why, suggest remedies, and so forth. Now, we can say that when such cases are the focus, there is a sense in which the student is “involved” in the question, since he or she is thinking about the case and trying to come up with a sensible, intelligent analysis. Yet, this is not the kind of involvement the existentialists are talking about. In this scenario, even though a particular student may be said to be “involved” with the question being studied, it is only at a *conceptual* level, if we might put it like that, and not at an *existential* level.

A different type of case will help us to see why this distinction is a crucial one for existentialist thought. We need to introduce a situation where the individual is involved at an existential level and not merely considering the matter conceptually.<sup>4</sup> So let us think about a case of an employee at a company who, in the day to day job, is faced with financial temptation. In charge of considerable funds, this employee can misappropriate money with little danger of getting caught. Suppose the worker gives into temptation and steals from the company. The existentialist argument is that this individual is now *involved* in the question of the morality of the topic in a way that the students in the business ethics class are not. Having stolen money, this person is dealing with the attitudes and emotions entailed by their action, which will likely include a combination of excitement, pleasure, even elation, but also worry, guilt, perhaps shame and remorse, along with a fear of getting caught. Being in the middle of an ethical situation that involves the experience of stealing, one is not just *thinking* about different aspects of such a case as part of a rational analysis. That is to say, one is implicated in the question existentially and not only conceptually. The same is true of course in situations where one is faced with real temptation, struggles against it, but does not succumb. Those who have to deal with an employee caught stealing are also implicated existentially. So, we are not talking only about moral transgressions but any area of (in this type of case) moral experience in which the questioner is involved at the existential level. This is what Marcel and other existentialists are referring to when they say that philosophical reflection occurs best when we are involved in the question. Moreover, they further add, crucially, that our reflection about these types of situations is *derived* in an essential way from the situation, indeed is trying to explain, convey or make sense of the actual situation, at least to some degree. Theory is important but it must not replace experience, or ignore or downplay the experience that gives rise to it, especially with regard to questions that are existential in nature.

It is the experience the person is undergoing that is the focus, not the thinking about the experience, which, according to Marcel’s unique phenomenological account of it, of necessity misses the reality because our unique situational context is set aside in a move to a disinterested inquiry. It follows then that an abstract understanding cannot capture totally the experience. Nor can it be a substitute for personal development, which requires engagement with real experiences and not conceptual analysis. So, in the case of yielding to the temptation to steal, we can give a

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this is a problem, according to the existentialists, for philosophy in general, and especially analytical philosophy—it frequently misses the existentialist aspect and focuses almost exclusively on the conceptual (or what we might describe as the philosophical analysis), even though it is the former, they claim, that is most important, and from which the latter is abstracted. We will return to this crucial matter later in this article.

good conceptual analysis of the case and of what temptation seems to mean, but this is not the same as the experience—of actually giving in to temptation and then dealing with what this means (though perhaps we could allow that reflection on the experience could help us manage the experience better—we will return to this important point later).

This kind of analysis does not only apply to cases involving the will—where one is tempted, for instance, and must respond freely. Although free will is involved in all of our experiences, the experience itself could be caused by external factors, such as a natural disaster, an illness, or, as in the recent Covid pandemic, situations leading to the loss of one's job, or one's business, and so forth. Sometimes, as Aristotle noted, we place ourselves in such situations, sometimes life circumstances places us in them, but in all cases there is not just the question of how we (freely) respond to them, but also the distinction between undergoing the experience and a detached conceptual analysis of the experience.

So the existentialist perspective that we find in Marcel insists that there is a deeper sense of being involved: the fact that the question I am considering has some personal significance for me that it would not have *in the same way* for anyone else. And it is important to keep in mind that we are asking *a question*, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that our various experiences raise questions that we must confront. These existential questions lead to a type of nagging disquiet and require a decision; they frequently raise worries relating to the correct moral response, how we should treat others, our intersubjective relationships, and questions relating to meaning and purpose. So we are moving between the levels of experience and reflection all the time. Not all questions are of this sort, but some are, and especially those we ask in philosophy. At least this has been claimed for philosophy by many thinkers throughout history, who have followed a similar approach, including Kierkegaard, who stressed that religious and ethical questions especially are of this sort. For Marcel, if we were to ask the same question in the abstract (that is, not from the point of view of an individual, not from the point of view of me or you, for instance), then we would be embarking on a different type of investigation.

The question of God's existence is another instructive example. One may ask this question as a human being in a specific set of life circumstances for whom the question comes at some personal concern or cost; this means that one genuinely wants to know the answer or at least to make a decision with regard to the matter because of the impact it will have on one's life, in terms of meaning, practice, fulfillment, direction, and so forth. One is then caught up in the question, perhaps wrestles with it, worries about the answer, longs for the fruit a decision may bring, one way or the other. In short, the answer *matters* to a person in an important way. It is not an academic exercise that one can forget about as soon as one stops thinking about the question, or an intellectual puzzle that one can resolve in a fitting way, in the way one might resolve a problem with one's car. The novels of Graham Greene portray this kind of involvement in religious matters in a powerful way, particularly the characters in *The End of the Affair* (1951) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945).

This scenario is different from the case of someone (a philosopher perhaps!) who engages with what might be described as the philosophical question about God's existence. The philosopher approaches the topic in a theoretical way, regards the problem primarily as a logical exercise, as it were, as a topic that is intellectually exciting to think about, and from the study of which one gets personal satisfaction. Yet, the moves of the argument and perhaps even an acceptable settlement of the problem may make little difference in the life of the person considering the question. Many traditional philosophical questions can be and indeed are approached in this manner. Marcel emphasizes the distinction between this approach and the

former by noting that another person could be substituted for the inquirer and the intellectual puzzle would be the same. This way of thinking about the question of God's existence may be described as a conceptual inquiry, but not as an existential inquiry. Those who ask the existential question are concerned with or implicated in the question in a way unique to them, and those who don't are not implicated, but remain at an abstract, theoretical level, the level of reflective analysis. Several related questions in the philosophy of religion can be categorized in this latter way, such as: is evil compatible with God's nature; why does God allow evil and suffering; what is the role of evil and redemption in human experience; is the existence of evil a necessary consequence of human free will; could God have created a paradise where there is no evil; would such a paradise be more preferable to our world, and so forth? (We will come back to this topic in the second half of the article.) Obviously, believers and unbelievers alike could consider the question of God's existence in either form.

One can argue that a concern with existentialist questions seems to be the way that the Ancient Greek thinkers understood philosophy. Pythagoras is said to have founded a school of philosophy that was akin to a religious movement. Socrates and Plato seemed to mainly operate with this conception of philosophy, that it was a personal quest, in the way Marcel describes. The philosopher is on a process of self-discovery that involves self-knowledge and self-development, and so is caught up in the questions he is asking. One of Socrates' well known remarks is "know thyself," emphasizing that the moral and spiritual development of the self is the aim of philosophical thinking. He challenges Gorgias (in Plato's dialogue) by asking him who he is. Philosophy is regarded by these thinkers as a vocation; let us not forget that a vocation means that it is not quite an ordinary job! Sometimes other jobs are described this way as well, such as nursing or teaching. But I believe that these are not vocations in the way philosophy is meant as a vocation. Careers such as these are seen as an especially good fit for a set of skills that certain people possess; moreover, participants in these careers often have a sense of mission such as healing the sick or improving the lives of students through education. But philosophy understood as a vocation goes deeper than this. It is about the whole person and not about giving expression to a certain set of skills a person might have (even though it is true that some people may have skills that are very suitable for philosophy and that draw them to the subject).<sup>5</sup>

We see this understanding of philosophy as a vocation manifested also in Socrates' questioning of Euthyphro in Plato's dialogue. Even though there is a philosophical question at issue—the Euthyphro question—it is nevertheless an intensely personal matter for both of them, since Euthyphro is prosecuting his own father and Socrates has an upcoming court case. Interesting perhaps, in the light of our discussion here, the Euthyphro question itself is left mostly unresolved in the dialogue. Yet, we must acknowledge that there *is* a more abstract question involved. Perhaps we can say that the subject matter of philosophy may be understood in two senses; we can make a distinction between two types or two categories of philosophical question. The first type are philosophical questions that can be considered in both ways (such as the question of God), that is, as part of a personal quest, questions in which the questioner is involved or implicated, and also in a more abstract way, questions that raise vexing conundrums (the question of God raises abstract questions such as: "If God is perfect, can he be really free?")

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Republic*, Plato emphasizes the qualities the philosopher king must possess. Although he mentions some skills, such as having a good memory, he mostly focuses on moral character and self-knowledge, emphasizing love of wisdom, truth and justice, along with the virtues of courage and temperance, among others (see Book VI in any edition).

or “does God know the future?”; or “Can an omnipotent being do anything?, etc.). (This then raises the important issue of what is the relationship between these two ways of considering the same topic, and it is here, as we will see, that the existentialists have an interesting and unique perspective.) The second type then are those other philosophical questions that do not seem to fit into this first category; some questions and perhaps even some branches of philosophy engage only with abstract, detached questions, questions that do not seem to have much of an existentialist dimension to them, that do not affect us or trouble us existentially. Arguably and no doubt controversially, abstract metaphysics or the philosophy of logic, or indeed most epistemology, might be so regarded—as not usually raising existential type questions in the lives of those who pursue these areas of inquiry.

In the light of these observations about philosophy by Marcel and other existentialist thinkers, one might wonder if this latter way of doing philosophy is worthy, if it has a legitimate place in the discipline, if it misses something essential to philosophy and philosophizing, which is to be lamented and regretted? Our question also has special application to the teaching of philosophy. Professors of philosophy are always trying to get students more deeply interested in the subject, to not simply be going through the motions. What does this mean in the case of philosophy? From an existential point of view, we can see that it means attempting to get students “involved” in the questions they are studying—in Marcel’s sense—to consider what the questions mean in their own experience, how they might apply to their own experiences, why philosophical questions are important to consider *from the point of view of being a human being*. (Indeed, this is one of the reasons students usually find courses in existentialism particularly engaging.) And while we often struggle with explaining why a liberal arts education is an essential part of a well-rounded education today, this is surely one of the reasons why, and also why philosophy has a special place in the curriculum. So from the point of view of teaching in the discipline, we might favor student assignments such as “explain how doubt and reason play a role in your own beliefs and values,” rather than a more abstract question such as “what is the relationship between doubt, reason and belief.” The first question requires our students to think about their own beliefs and engage with them in a way that the second does not. Yet, both types of assignment are surely worthy and acceptable in their place.

Unfortunately, the abstract approach to philosophy is often dominant in certain traditions, and has quite a grip on the profession today. Influenced perhaps by the general existentialist approach (which is often confirmed in their own experience with philosophical questions), many today in and around philosophy greatly lament this trend, and some become disillusioned with the profession. (This is why the question of ontological priority is an important one.) One can find quite a number of philosophers today who don’t seem interested in philosophical questions in the first sense, at least not in any obvious way and who regard the discipline as a kind of game. There seems to be quite a large number of thinkers who are not especially “involved” in the questions they study, or interested in the existential aspect of the discipline! Why not? It might be a matter of personality or training, or that they are drawn to abstract, theoretical questions, or (as noted) that they have certain skills that make them good at philosophy, even though they have little interest in it in an existentialist sense. Some may even believe that being involved in a question is a distraction, or that it compromises objectivity, or is too personal or spiritual! But there is a danger in this, according to the existentialists—that philosophy loses touch with humanity, with its main purpose, especially if such an approach is touted as the correct way to do philosophy. Marcel insists that being involved in the question is essential in philosophy, and has ontological priority over the purely conceptual approach. It is because

individual persons are involved in challenging experiences that questions for reflection arise in the first place, why they are pursued and why the answer matters—and motivates all other ways of looking at a question, including those at the conceptual, and at the disciplinary, level.

This is why philosophy can be a *transformative* subject, and why philosophy was long associated with moral and spiritual transformation and the pursuit of wisdom. These were the areas of life where people were more likely to be personally engaged by philosophical inquiry, where the outcome of their investigation was likely to have an effect in their day to day lives. It was also in this sense perhaps that philosophy could be said to be working toward a body of knowledge because the personal transformation of the person could be tied to the notion of human nature and human fulfillment in the objective moral sense that one could reach wrong answers on a question and so go off track in terms of human flourishing. This idea has been almost completely lost in contemporary philosophy—the idea that philosophy involves wisdom and a body of knowledge. Indeed, one of the legacies of enlightenment thinking and a mark now of contemporary philosophy is that *the practice of philosophy is often regarded as more important than its results*. The discipline is now dominated by relativism and anti-realism, and as a consequence work in philosophy is increasingly motivated by prior political views that cannot be justified within the discipline itself but that serve as the motivation for doing philosophy in a particular way. It is not an exaggeration to say that this approach and understanding is very far removed from Marcel's conception of philosophy, and that these trends seem to be moving the discipline closer to a state of crisis.

## II: Mystery and Problem, and the analysis of Evil

These reflections on the existentialist nature of philosophy have profound implications for a consideration of the question of evil in human experience, a foundational theme in Marcel. They will also help us more specifically to tease out the implications of Marcel's view for traditional philosophy of religion, an area of inquiry in which evil is regarded as a "problem." A dialogue between the two perspectives will occupy us in this and the next section. It is instructive to compare the traditional approach with Marcel's, not only to understand Marcel's approach better, but also to bring out his dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy of religion and theodicy, and to ask whether or not it is justified. As part of this discussion, we need to consider whether we can support a positive outlook toward the work that is done in philosophy of religion.

We must keep in mind that the "question" of evil for Marcel includes both an experience and reflection upon an experience; it is not exclusively an experience or exclusively a conceptual question. The experience of evil raises questions with which we must engage, questions that lead to a sense of uneasiness, that generate worry and distress, that demand consideration and response. Questions relating to the experience of evil and suffering are especially severe and can threaten our focus on everyday living, along with our sense of meaning and purpose. Moreover, these are not general or abstract questions; they involve our direct experience as a human being living in a particular situation in existence, generated by our "situated involvement."<sup>6</sup> So it is this type of question we need to keep before our minds when we are talking about evil. We

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<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion of the notion of "situated involvement," see my *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2008), pp.32-38.

should note that Marcel's remarks about the problem of evil are rather sparse, and that some excavation is necessary to bring out his meaning, as it is with several of his main themes. But if we take into account the general themes in his overall philosophy, we can be reasonably sure of his approach to the topic of the presence of evil in human life. Though, as we will see, some difficulties remain; there are important issues that he does not address but that must be considered for a more adequate elaboration of his position, and for a more thorough analysis of the general topic.

Marcel has no qualms about adopting an almost purely existentialist approach in his work. He has described his method as neo-Socratic, and indeed his philosophical style well exemplifies this description because he approaches many issues in a roundabout way, looking and probing from different angles, trying to discover the meaning in real life situations, supplemented by a generous range of everyday examples. This approach enables him to tease out by means of careful phenomenological descriptions objective truths about the human condition (which, from the propositional or conceptual point of view are an accurate, though always inadequate, representation of human experience). There is always present in his thought the key existentialist theme that the truth is elusive, hidden, opaque and that philosophical reflection is an attempt to dig at it while not quite reaching it. And the reason it cannot be reached is precisely because it involves the real life situation of the subject doing the questioning. It can be revealed perhaps, but not captured in a conceptual description, such as philosophy (or science) would typically require today. He seems to think that this is true of the problem of evil in particular, but also for many other areas of experience. And so Marcel introduces his famous distinctions between problem and mystery and primary and secondary reflection to help us with these cases and to further develop this fundamental existentialist truth about the human condition.

Marcel is well known for emphasizing the insight that we live in a broken world, one that is "on the one hand, riddled with problems and, on the other, determined to allow no room for mystery"<sup>7</sup> His foundational distinction between problem and mystery is well known, so we do not need to belabor it here, but let us remind ourselves of the main insight so that we can appreciate its relevance for his approach to the question of evil. He expresses it this way:

A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of *as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity.*<sup>8</sup>

A problem, he holds, is a question in which I am not involved, in which the identity of the person asking the question is not a factor. In the realm of the problematic, it makes no difference which individual is asking the question because all of the relevant information is "before" the questioner. The overcoming of a problem inevitably involves some "technique," a technique that could be, and often is, employed by any other person who is confronting the same problem. Thus, the identity of the questioner can be changed without altering the problem itself. When dealing with a problem, I am trying to discover a solution that can become common property. Consequently, it can, at least in theory, be rediscovered by anybody at all. We seek a

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<sup>7</sup> *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. M. Harari (New York: Citadel, 1970), p.12 (hereinafter *PE*).

<sup>8</sup> Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. K. Farrer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), p.117 (hereinafter *BH*).

solution that is objective, verifiable, universal and functional. As Marcel puts it, “this idea of a validity for ‘anybody at all’ or of a thinking in general has less and less application the more deeply one penetrates into the inner courts of philosophy...”<sup>9</sup> An example of a problem would be figuring out how to wire an electrical circuit (one of Marcel’s examples), or trying to remove an “app” and its irritating notifications from one’s phone (one of my examples!).

Marcel cleverly describes a mystery, on the other hand, as a “problem that encroaches upon its own data.”<sup>10</sup> Such a “problem” is, in fact, meta-problematic; it is a question in which the identity of the questioner becomes an issue itself—where, in fact, the questioner is *involved* in the question he or she is asking (in the way illustrated in Part 1). At the level of the mysterious, the identity of the questioner is tied to the question and, therefore, the questioner is not interchangeable with another questioner. To change the questioner would be to alter the question (even if considering the same question from an abstract point of view). It makes every difference who is asking the question when confronting a mystery. Here, at the level of the mysterious, the distinctions “in-me” and “before-me” break down. Marcel insists that mysteries can be found in the question of Being (what he refers to as the question of *my ontological exigency*), the question of the unity of the body and mind, and—perhaps the archetypal examples of mystery—in the experience of evil which presages the concomitant choice between hope and despair, and in the areas of freedom and love.<sup>11</sup> On the question of the renowned question of Being, Marcel insists that I cannot question Being as if my being is *not* at issue in the questioning; the question of Being and the question of who I am (my being) cannot be addressed separately. These two questions are somehow incoherent if approached as problems; however, taken together, their mysterious character is revealed and they cancel themselves out *qua* problems. Even though the term “mystery” is often used in the domain of religion, Marcel is not using it in the same sense. He claims that although the realm of mystery cannot be fully captured in conceptual knowledge, it is not therefore “unknowable” (a point to which we will return).

We can consider a case by way of illustration, that of the redemption of the character, Rodion Raskolnikov, in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s masterly novel, *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Raskolnikov has thrown off the formal Christianity of his upbringing and is caught up in a nihilistic worldview. From this vantage point, he commits a terrible crime with the murder of the elderly pawnbroker and her sister, and, through a combination of his own intense feelings and battles with his conscience, along with external pressures and social stress, it exerts a debilitating weight on him, slowly draining his physical and mental resolve, and challenging his nihilism. He represents any person who commits a serious act of wrongdoing, and then experiences genuine guilt for it, begins to disintegrate under its weight, suffers remorse and shame, and who slowly realizes that redemption is the only way forward. Only near the end of the novel, when he finally confesses (and with the support of his family and even the Chief of Police), and pays for his crime with a long period of imprisonment, does Raskolnikov find redemption and start the existential journey toward becoming a whole person again. Although he initially tried to, Raskolnikov (an intellectual) cannot consider the question of his evil action and his quest for redemption as a problem—from an abstract point of view as it were (which he had done in an earlier published scholarly article)—because of his own involvement in it. He is ineluctably immersed in the events, deeply concerned about his initial motivations and driven by the realization that the murder he has committed is destroying his personality, and also affects the

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<sup>9</sup> *MBI*, p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> *PE.*, p.19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.12-20.



lives of his family and friends. He wrestles with himself; gradually he is helped to come to terms with his actions by his special friend, Sonya, who shows that he is worthy of redemption. Raskolnikov is unable to separate an analysis of the concepts of right and wrong, guilt and redemption, and insights about these concepts, from his own experiences of these aspects of the human condition. He cannot separate the “in me” and the “before me” because he is immersed in experiences that partly constitute who he is, and his situation will partly define how he responds to his predicament. It is only at the level of real experience that these concepts seem to make any sense, since there is no such thing as disintegration or redemption in the abstract; there is only a person who disintegrates or who needs redemption, or those others who help one attain redemption or who frustrate it.

Yet, there is surely some value in discussing the abstract questions as well (such as, what does redemption mean, why is it necessary, how does it lead to self-development, how does it affect the personality, how is it achieved?)—all intellectual questions demanding intelligent, careful, and, crucially, *accurate* answers. (Just as there is value in the related notion of witness, where, for instance, we can learn from witnessing a case of redemption, even if we do not undergo it ourselves.) We will come back to this issue a bit later, but one of the reasons that literature and drama is so helpful to the existentialists, including Marcel, is that it brings to life, as it were, these questions in authentic characters, thereby capturing and portraying something that would be missing from a purely conceptual analysis. So the distinction between experience and reflection is crucial; it also raises the question of *objectivity* with regard to the reflective realm (for example, there must be an objective meaning of redemption—an accurate or adequate conceptual account of it, as opposed to an inaccurate or inadequate account of it).

With regard to the question of evil that arises throughout life (so intensely portrayed in the lives of Raskolnikov and Sonya), Marcel seems to suggest that it is one area of our experience where we have great difficulty *conceiving* of it at all. He seems to think that in this particular case it is difficult to separate a conceptual analysis from the experience. The gulf between the experience of evil and the conceptual analysis is so vast that the analysis is not only inadequate but it might seem to belittle or trivialize, even mock, the experience of evil and suffering in the life of a person.<sup>12</sup> In his early work, Marcel suggested that the mysterious realm and the ontological are identical.<sup>13</sup> This then implies that there is a mystery of knowledge (which Jacques Maritain saw and brought out in his *Degrees of Knowledge* [1938], but this is missed by the modern epistemologist who turns it into a problem). He then suggests that metaphysical thought is best defined as “reflection trained on mystery,” and as a result progress in this kind of thinking is not really conceivable. One can only make progress in problematic thought. A very clear example, he suggests, is the question of evil. He later observes that the difficulty is that evil which is “simply recognized, or even contemplated, ceases to be evil which is *suffered*; in fact I think it simply ceases to be evil...I can only grasp it in proportion as it touches me...”<sup>14</sup> Traditional philosophy has tended to reduce the mystery of evil to the problem of evil.

In these remarks on evil, Marcel initially appears to be talking about the question of evil in general as it challenges us in our day to day lives. He is not referring specifically to the problem of evil as it might be discussed in the philosophy of religion, though perhaps his

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<sup>12</sup> See Jill Hernandez, “On the Problem and Mystery of Evil,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 23.2 (April 2018), p.117.

<sup>13</sup> *BH*, pp.100ff.

<sup>14</sup> *PE*, p.19.

references to “the problem of evil” are meant to include work in the philosophy of religion. He seems to be primarily referring to problems of evil that face mankind and that cause suffering, such as evil actions, disease and poverty, though his remarks are not clear on this distinction. These issues are related of course to the task of theodicy in the philosophy of religion, since they help to generate some of the initial concerns. So, we might wonder then if Marcel’s criticism of looking at evil as a problem—that this approach misses the real question— extends to work in the philosophy of religion? There are three issues to think about arising from his thoughts on the subject of evil in human experience: 1. whether the problem of evil in the philosophy of religion misses something vital in a way that compromises its subject matter; 2. whether studying the problem of evil in the philosophy of religion is therefore worthwhile; 3. a related further question is: whether studying the problem of evil can help us in any way with the existential question? We will keep these questions in mind in what follows.

Traditional philosophers of religion have been much engaged by the problem of evil. Indeed, the problem is often a reason advanced by atheists for why they don’t believe in God. The “problem” arises because if the world has been created by an omnipotent and omnibenevolent being, then we would not expect to find evil in it, it is argued. This applies to both moral evil (evil done by human beings, such as murder) and natural evil (evil that occurs naturally in the universe and that causes much human suffering, such as natural disasters). The existence of evil gives rise to a series of problems that philosophers have considered, such as: why would a good and all powerful God allow evil; is evil necessary as a contrast to good or can good exist without it; is suffering part of a meaningful life; do suffering and justice conflict; could or should God have created a paradise without evil, and so forth? The general problem for theistic philosophers is why would God allow evil to occur, since it seems to be incompatible with both the nature and power of God. This is a fair question since on its face there does seem to be a serious incompatibility. Philosophers have given much thought to the topic, and many have proposed various arguments, and indeed theodicies in response, such as those of St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, G.W. Leibniz, and more recently, C.S. Lewis, and John Hick.<sup>15</sup>

Marcel wishes to draw attention to a different way of considering the fact of evil in human experience. He wishes to distinguish sharply between the existential problem of evil (how a particular individual is affected by, responds to, copes with, engages with, understands, an experience of evil in his or her own life, and how it relates to their experiences of and understanding of meaning, purpose, etc.) and the philosophical problem of evil (how the philosopher might think about the “problem” of evil, including why it is that evil exists in the world, how the fact of evil is to be reconciled with the existence of an all-good and all-powerful God, and, more generally, with design and purpose, as we have just noted). Marcel seems to hold that the existential question is the only one I can consider, noting that—being ‘involved’ with the experience of evil is “the fundamental fact.”<sup>16</sup> The difficulty is that the philosopher seeks solutions that can be presented to everyone in a logically objective manner, so almost by definition these solutions cannot fully address the existential question. Marcel also thinks that

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<sup>15</sup> As a representative sample, see C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); St. Augustine, *City of God*, xii, sections 6-7 in any edition; Michael Peterson, *God and Evil: An Introduction to the Issues* (Boulder, Co: Westview, 1988); James Petrik, *Evil Beyond Belief* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000); R. Douglas Geivett, *Evil and the Evidence for God* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple U.P., 1993); Daniel Howard-Synder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana U.P., 1996).

<sup>16</sup> *PE*, p.19.

sometimes philosophers can fall into the error of thinking that the philosophical problem should be the main way to approach the topic of evil, and as a result can fail to appreciate the necessity of helping people deal with the existential problem. And dealing with the existential problem is the key thing we have to do. In general, this failure is something we can observe in many different areas of primary reflection (which is the realm of the conceptual), including academic disciplines, which sometimes lose touch with the experiences that gave rise to the problems the disciplines are supposed to be addressing. This is a point that Kierkegaard made forcefully about the discipline of theology.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, there is a whole literature in theology explaining how one can live a morally and spiritually God-centered life; but this is not the same thing as actually achieving a God-centered life, and the bridge from the conceptual to the real has proved very difficult. There are many who are experts on the conceptual question but who do not put it into practice (and vice versa). (Yet it does not follow that there is no significant connection between the two realms, a point we will come back to momentarily.)

There are a number of rather inchoate points that Marcel seems to be making here that we can try to make more clear, especially if we take into account some of his remarks elsewhere to help us. First, he seems to be making quite a strong claim: that if we state or simply observe the question of evil, in the abstract as it were, as a puzzle or a logical conundrum, such as we might do in philosophy of religion, then it is no longer evil that we are considering. Why is this? It seems to be because he thinks that one can only grasp or recognize evil insofar as one actually experiences it. This point is well illustrated in Marcel's dramatic works. A case in point is his play, *The Emissary* (recently translated into English).<sup>18</sup> In this drama, the action takes place during the occupation of France by the Nazi regime during World War II, and deals with many of the challenging situations and moral dilemmas that emerge from the occupation of one's country by a brutal enemy. A harrowing state of affairs that most of us can barely imagine, Marcel's play raises the question of how *we* might react if faced with such circumstances. One central issue is the correct moral stance toward the resistance movement. Many believe they have a moral duty to aid the resistance, but some are reluctant; others are afraid, still others become collaborators. The mystery of evil is on full display in both the hands the characters are dealt, and their free responses to this hand. Bravery, a sense of justice, along with deceit and betrayal are all in the air, as are real worries about reprisals, violence, suffering and irreparable loss. As noted more than once in the play, this is not an academic exercise but a lived reality, bringing out clearly the distinction between concrete experience, and conceptual reflection upon experience. These characters are portrayed as being in a messy, stressful and extremely morally challenging set of circumstances. This is what the audience are being asked to enter into—helped by the dramatic action—not abstract questions that would be part of a philosophical discussion.

Clément Ferrier, the father of the principal family, is the Emissary of the play's title. Held as a prisoner by the Germans, and eventually released, he returns as a broken man, physically and psychologically, and dies shortly afterwards. His state of physical, emotional and psychological collapse, as one character suggests, is the occasion for much suffering and deep

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<sup>17</sup> See Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Alistair Hannay (Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge U.P., 2009 ed.), pp.303-322.

<sup>18</sup> See Gabriel Marcel, *Toward Another Kingdom: Two Dramas of the Darker Years*, translated by Maria Traub (St. Augustine's Press, 2024); also, Brendan Sweetman and Maria Traub, "Introduction to Gabriel Marcel and *The Emissary*," *Journal of Continental Philosophy*, Vol. 1 (2), 2020, pp.318–355.

soul-searching on behalf of his family concerning their conduct during the occupation. The difficulty is encapsulated in the character of his daughter Sylvie who initially seems to have a confident moral analysis of events, but who ends up doing some serious soul-searching. By the end she seems lost, and questions herself. A purely conceptual analysis will not begin to reflect Sylvie's worries and her wrestling with her conscience. In a similar way, Antoine Sorgue (her fiancé), invokes the notion of Sartrean bad faith, wondering if he has betrayed a colleague because of his own moral failings, and is in denial about it.

Marcel is saying to us that sometimes we must probe the depths of *our own experiences* to arrive at the truth, that a surface, detached, conceptual analysis may be inaccurate and misleading, and could even be a form of self-deception of the kind that we are tempted to engage in when faced with extreme moral stress. The characters of the play are depicted in existentialist situations that provoke typical existentialist moods: anxiety, stress, guilt, remorse, a struggle with freedom, temptation, experiences of suffering, love, respect, death. It does seem to be the case that conceptual reflection is not equal to the task of unraveling the reality of their situations. Indeed, Marcel suggests that there are no neat or even adequate logical solutions. Forgiveness, understanding and a move toward the future are the only real options (an interesting, but not uncontroversial, proposal).

It is also hard to see how thinking about the philosophical question would help people in these challenging situations, notwithstanding the fact that events like a World War and occupation of one's country are surely occasions for deep reflection about the human condition in general, and in particular about the problem of moral evil. Indeed, there are some, such as the Jewish author, Elie Wiesel, who portrays powerfully in his works the reality that it is hard to believe in God after the Holocaust. Of course, Wiesel did not reveal this insight in a vacuum—from a conceptual point of view—since his family were among its victims, and a horror from which he himself barely escaped. We can interpret *The Emissary* to be making an indirect point about evil regarded as a "problem": that those who, for example, do theodicy, are seeking and proposing a solution to the problem of evil, a solution that must be regarded as "objective" in the sense that it is available for all to consider from a logical point of view. But this means that the experience of the questioner is left aside, and so the discussion does not do justice to their situation, and may even distort it. This seems to be one of Marcel's main themes about evil.

A second key implication of Marcel's view then would seem to be that *there is no universal solution* to the existential problem, because since evil affects people in different ways, it would seem to follow that there could not be a general solution that would apply to everyone. Therefore, there seems little point in approaching it as a problem since a problem is striving for an objective solution, one that would work for anybody. It seems that each person would need their own solution (which may include acknowledging the reality of God, denying the existence of God, making a choice between hope and despair, as part of the solution, since the question can hardly be avoided in the face of human suffering, whether or not one is especially interested in the problems relating to evil as addressed in the philosophy of religion). This seems to be an implication of his view. Though, perhaps all is not hopeless in the sense that evil might affect human beings in quite similar ways, especially in a psychological sense, and so there might be a possible way of developing an objective approach that would apply to a large number of people (just as there is in dealing with grief, for example.) Marcel does not seem to have considered this possibility, or at least to have given it enough attention. I will come back to this point because I think it is instructive concerning how we are to interpret and apply his view in general, and how we must address the question of objectivity and avoid any kind of relativism.

A third implication is that Marcel seems also to be issuing a warning: that we should be very careful not to think that the philosophical analysis is the main way to approach the experience of evil. One of his concluding entries in his *Metaphysical Journal* suggests this view when we asks what can we expect from a philosophical theory of evil? He thinks the answer is linked to the issue of whether or not I tend to regard the world as a spectacle for me. I must recognize that I am not in fact a *spectator* at all, but that I *participate* in the world. Evil is not then to be regarded as a structural defect which could be located and solved?<sup>19</sup> This would be a serious mistake and would succeed only in distorting the subject matter and leading us astray. In addition, there is a second caution: that we should be careful not to make the mistake of thinking that if a question does not seem to have an objective solution in the domain of problems that it is, therefore, insoluble. This is because at the existential level a person could find a “solution” for themselves, Marcel seems to be suggesting. It would not be an intellectual, universal, “objective,” indeed detached, solution to be sure, but one where the individual could find a wholesome response and come to terms in a way that is not wishful thinking with the fact of evil. Is this possible? Let us try to analyze his novel, intriguing but somewhat controversial views on these matters with a more critical eye in our last section.

### III: Existential and Philosophical Questions: Critical Analysis

I find Marcel’s claims concerning the question of evil in human experience somewhat counter-intuitive. Moreover, as someone who works in philosophy of religion, it is disconcerting to suggest that the pursuit of theodicy, for example, actually misses the problem. On the other hand, I am very sympathetic to his insight that the experience of evil differs for people and is significantly defined by their unique situation, that an abstract analysis misses vital elements, and that if no abstract analysis is available, this does not mean that an individual could not have some adequate personal response. These seem powerful points; it is therefore necessary to tease out his view further, further than he does himself.

Let us first consider whether it is correct that the philosophical discussion of the problem of evil misses the real problem. On one level this could be true if it means that the evil an individual experiences, say troubling circumstances of birth, succumbing to temptation that leads to suffering, or being the victim of injustice, is not the actual problem one focuses on, though the philosophical discussion does include these types of evil, even if only in a general, background sense. Jill Hernandez has noted that Marcel regards evil as in part a “felt experience,”<sup>20</sup> which involves our embodiment. This is a part of his larger argument that our embodiment places us in a situational context, and contributes to the nature and meaning of our experiences.<sup>21</sup> And so, because of this general view of the human person, Marcel finds it difficult to characterize evil as a problem in any sense.

We could approach the topic by saying that the philosophical problem of evil only deals with the existential problem *in general*, not this or that specific person’s experience. We might say that it piggybacks off specific existential problems but ignores them. Although it arises in specific existential situations, it moves immediately to the general topic, and focuses on the matter in relation to God and the more general question of meaning and purpose (of which the

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<sup>19</sup> See *Metaphysical Journal* in *Presence and Immortality*, trans. M. Machado and revised by H.J. Koren (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne U.P., 1967), pp.125ff.

<sup>20</sup> Jill Hernandez, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, pp.114ff.

<sup>21</sup> For an elaboration of this argument, see my *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel*, pp.23-38.

questions in philosophy of religion are a subset). This is not quite true, though, because the philosophical problem seems even more abstract than that—it seems not to be concerned at all with how suffering affects the human personality, in terms of meaning, purpose, survival, cause and effect, and so forth, but with more abstract questions such as why would God allow evil, does suffering play a role in life, the relationship between suffering and purpose (and related questions, noted above). The focus is always on the question at the conceptual level in its various dimensions, including with regard to the incompatibility of evil with God’s nature and power, and not on how evil affects people. So those who study the problem need never have grappled in any serious way themselves with the existential question. In addition, it is usually approached from the point of view of the question of the rationality of religious and secularist views, and not with regard to how to make sense of the experience of evil, with the effects of suffering in life, with whether suffering challenges meaning, suggests absurdity, and so forth. These are all interesting questions, philosophers of religion will agree, but they usually do not focus on them in their work.

The typical approach in a standard theodicy is to first identify what is meant by evil, and then to move immediately to the question of whether its existence in the world is compatible with the nature of God understood in a certain way. Several qualifications and proposals are then suggested, such as that God deliberately placed evil into the world to test us and help us grow morally and spiritually (John Hick), or that evil occurred because man initially disobeyed God and so evil crept into the world as a privation or deficiency in that which was originally good (St Augustine), or that although evil is a difficulty it is not sufficient to undermine the existence of God, given all of the other supporting evidence (any number of thinkers). In this general approach, there is usually little focus on how evil affects a particular person, or how an individual personality is shaped by suffering, how one might cope with the fact of evil. These matters, while no doubt important, are not typically part of the problem we as philosophers of religion are addressing. This seems to be one of points to which Marcel wishes to draw our attention.

However, there is another way that we can consider the relationship between the existential and philosophical questions: we can ask if a philosophical consideration of the problem of evil could help one with the existential question, the question of how to make sense of evil in one’s own life and experience? Developing the question further, we might identify two further ways of thinking about this matter, consider two ways of what “making sense” means. One is to focus on the task of coming to terms with evil in one’s own life—this is well illustrated in the character of Sonya, for example, in *Crime and Punishment*. She has had to deal with very difficult life circumstances of poverty, exploitation and abuse—being a victim of suffering, reconciling herself to it, navigating stressful challenges in daily living, the existential question, to be sure. Evil is especially relevant to the notion of purpose and also to the question of justice (as illustrated in the *Book of Job*). In the realm of experience, it seems that making sense of it would have to be relative in some way to each person. An individual would find a way to cope with suffering, respond to it, perhaps to find some understanding at the level of theory, allowing one to settle on an integrated approach. This appears to confirm Marcel’s point that a conceptual analysis cannot work here, or even help, since it requires a “universal” solution.

A second way to approach the matter is from a more rational, more philosophical perspective—the question of whether one’s experiences suggest that there is no explanation for evil, that it is an absurdity in life, that no good can come from it, that it shows the random nature and ultimate meaninglessness of existence. Or, on the other hand, that it can be seen to have a

place within a larger scheme that has purpose and order. While hard to cope with existentially, one might come to accept that there is some overall point to evil and suffering, that there is likely an underlying purpose, or must be, and so forth (the kind of things that theodicies try to address). This approach acknowledges that the question begins as an experience, but then pushes us toward the reflective realm that is also part of life (which Marcel never denies). Now, surely with regard to this second way of looking at it, a consideration of the philosophical problem could be helpful. In what way? It seems that if one found a particular theodicy convincing from a rational point of view, or, more generally, is satisfied intellectually that God has a good reason for allowing the existence of evil, or, even more generally, that there is some explanation for evil—that somehow it can make sense within a theistic framework—that *this* conclusion would help one respond to the fact of evil and suffering in a more integrated and therefore more fruitful way.

I think we can see this kind of response in Raskolnikov's eventual confession of his crimes. He comes to the realization that his actions were gravely wrong, indeed has always known this, but finally admits it to himself, as he sees that his predicament is destroying him. Above all, he knows he needs redemption; it is the only way he can begin to heal and so he opens his mind again to the objective moral order, to meaning and purpose (due to Sonya's influence), and even to the transcendent. Many of these realizations, although driven by his experiences, are nevertheless partly conceptual. And so in this way, this "reflection trained upon mystery" may help one deal with the difficulty of evil and suffering from an existential point of view.

One's sense of meaning and purpose would remain intact in the face of evil, surely a common (existential) experience. To be sure, it would not be a fully satisfactory response, would not capture the experience or provide a completely adequate solution (as one might obtain for a medical problem). Yet, it would help one to respond to the experience in a more coherent, integrated way (perhaps not necessarily to cope better with the fact of evil, since coping is only one of a range of responses, and is also relative to one's personality and general circumstances). It may also not be any use to others in similar situations, though this is still not clear. In this way, the philosophical discussion could partially help with the existential question, help one respond to the fact of evil in an integrated way. We must acknowledge, however, that if on the other hand, one did not think that there was any reason for evil, that it was all senseless in a senseless world, it might make it harder for one to maintain a sense of purpose, to pursue a fruitful, integrated path.<sup>22</sup>

Is it possible that a philosopher could focus too much on the philosophical question, and ignore the existential question? We must first get clear about what this means. It might mean the philosopher focuses on the philosophical question when he or she should be focusing on the existential question, but this is surely not the way to read it. Either question is surely worthy of study (and perhaps we could also ask a parallel question to the one we are considering concerning what the philosopher who focuses exclusively on the existential question *is ignoring or leaving out?*). But the philosopher of religion focuses on the philosophical question.

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<sup>22</sup> Although it would take us too far off track here, this consideration motivates one of several inchoate arguments for the existence of God to be found throughout Marcel's work; for further on this, see my "The Experiential Argument for the Existence of God in Gabriel Marcel and Alvin Plantinga," in Francis O'Rourke (ed.), *Human Destinies: Philosophical Essays in Memory of Gerald Hanratty* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), pp.366–387.

However, as Hernandez suggests, it is very difficult to look upon the question of suffering this way, since it is not a problem that can be addressed in the abstract, as it were. Perhaps the experience of evil is an unusual case that cannot be solved in the usual way, even though to say that it is mysterious is neither to say that it is unknowable nor that it has no answer and leads to absurdity. It is an unusual problem because it involves the self, our situation and context, and is not the same “problem” when considered apart from these. Marcel thinks that evil is unlike the typical problems we face; as he puts it, “...evil appears wholly unsusceptible of being characterized and classified like an object we can control...evil takes us unawares, it surprises us with treachery, and does so in such a radical way that we are unable to locate who or what is to blame.”<sup>23</sup> Sometimes Marcel seems to think that it is unsolvable because it is suffered as a general condition of humanity.

Hernandez describes the situated experience of evil as involving a type of “epistemic privilege” which belongs only to those who are facing specific cases of suffering (this may be true of Raskolnikov, for instance). Many evils are of this kind; however, some are not, she suggests. She notes that these kinds of evil “are the sort of thing that Marcel thinks of as mysteries, not because they have a mystical quality but because they cannot be solved by identifying some fixable defect in function” [at least not in any realistic way].<sup>24</sup> She recalls Marcel’s remark in *Man Against Mass Society*: “When I say that evil is a mystery, I mean, very precisely, this: that in no sense can the notion of evil be assimilated to that of a defect of function which could be remedied by suitable methods.”<sup>25</sup> He further elaborates:

...the mystery of evil is one of the most significant examples we could choose...Evil reveals itself to me as...a mystery when I have recognized that I cannot treat myself as something external to evil, as simply having to observe evil from the outside, and map out its contours...I am implicated in evil, just as one is implicated, for instance, in some crime. Evil is not only in front of my eyes, it is within me...in such a realm the distinction between what is within me and what lies outside of me becomes meaningless...One can think of many other examples..the mystery of love...a mystery of knowledge...the mystery of the family...One remains at a level below the intimate reality of [these mysteries] so long as one is imprisoned by the categories imposed by the "problematic" approach.<sup>26</sup>

Marcel is surely right that these cases belong to the realm of mystery in his sense. Countless works of art, literature, and music have attempted to convey something of their nature, itself a recognition that such experiences are not amenable to conceptual mastery. Yet, even though we are unable to understand the suffering of others at the level of the mysterious, we can empathize with it (partially an intellectual exercise), and try to do something about it. Therefore, I think we can extend Hernandez’s point to note, as already mentioned, that those questions of evil that do not require special epistemic access piggyback off, are derived from, the one’s that

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<sup>23</sup> *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. S. Jolin & P. McCormick (Evanston, IL: Northwestern U.P., 1973), p.135 (hereinafter *TWB*); see Hernandez, pp.117ff for an excellent discussion of this point.

<sup>24</sup> Hernandez, p.122.

<sup>25</sup> *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G.S. Fraser (Chicago: Regnery, 1952), p.126-127 (hereinafter, *MMS*); see also Hernandez, p.119 and p.122.

<sup>26</sup> *MSS*, pp.90-91.



do. Hernandez goes on to explain that it is to the experience of hope that Marcel turns to dissolve the tension that seems to arise between the realms of problem and mystery, especially in relation to the mystery of evil and suffering. The centrality of death in human experience is also vital for Marcel because in part it presents us with the choice between hope and despair, and hope is the response that is true to our experience, and therefore, crucially, the more rational option.<sup>27</sup> Evil, he goes so far as to suggest, is in a certain sense synonymous with death.<sup>28</sup> According to Hernandez' insightful analysis, hope leads to community, challenges despair and plays a key role in transformation: "We experience the encounter as broken people. But being broken does not require a disintegration of hope. Rather, hope's possibilities can create existential, communal opportunities to flourish even if death is certain and betrayal may occur."<sup>29</sup> So, it may not seem to be the case that work on the problem of evil in the philosophy of religion could provide this "epistemic access" to the mystery of evil. Moreover, work in philosophy of religion is not usually focused on this matter.

This leads us to consider a second way in which a philosopher might give too much attention to the philosophical question. This is the scenario where the philosopher downplays or ignores the existential question so obsessed is he with the philosophical question! One can see how in some cases this might be bad. One can imagine that in a talk to a Church group a detached overview of Swinburne's theodicy might not go down very well, and even in our philosophy classes it could be detrimental to the students' education if they came to think that the problem of evil is only ever to be considered as a "problem," and were never introduced to the significance of the existential question. Yet surely these kind of worries are not grounds for a rejection of focus on the philosophical problem *in the appropriate context*—say that of a philosopher concerned about the rationality of various positions on a vexing problem confronting human existence. Could we push the worry further and say that the concern with pursuing research exclusively on the philosophical problem is that it ignores the real problem, and leads us all astray? I don't think we can go this far. For the reasons given, yes—that a general understanding of why God might allow evil might help us with the existential problem—but also because it would contribute to human understanding about this most tasking of human problems. So the philosopher who focuses almost exclusively on the philosophical problem and ignores the existential problem is doing something regrettable perhaps, depending on her own attitude and awareness, but she is not doing something deplorable, or fatal to the topic!

We should look at the question from the other side as well to consider whether an existential crisis might prompt one to reflect on the philosophical problem. Of course, the answer is in the affirmative; indeed, this is what motivates the general existentialist approach. Yet, this is one of those areas where Marcel's work is most vague, and needs further elaboration—on the relationship between the existential and the philosophical questions *from the point of view of the existential question*. But since he agrees that our experiences lead to philosophical reflection, it would seem to be the case then that in reflection we *would* be involved in our own question. So what does that mean? In Marcelian terms, it means that the individual has an existential experience on the one hand, and so philosophical reflection is

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<sup>27</sup> For more on hope, see my "Hope and Existentialism," in *Oxford Compendium of Hope*, ed. by Steven van del Heuvel and Anthony Scioli (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2024), forthcoming; also Jill Hernandez, *Gabriel Marcel's Ethics of Hope* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp.58-73; Joseph Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope* (Boston, MA.: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987).

<sup>28</sup> For a full discussion, see *TWB*, pp.132-146; see also Hernandez, p.121.

<sup>29</sup> Hernandez, p.123.

important since he is trying to get some perspective on the existential question. Yet, it also means that any rational position arrived at, on the other hand, *must also stand alone* as a philosophical contribution to the topic (stand alone from his own personal experiences, *this time looking at it from the perspective of the philosophical question, from the perspective of a detached, rational inquiry*). Some existentialists might object that this is not possible; that once a particular individual stands back in philosophical reflection it is no longer *his* question, in the sense explained above. Even though this may be true, it is hard to be clear about it, but it does not seem to follow that his objective reflection could not help in a fruitful way with coming to terms with his (existential) experience.

This is a profoundly important issue to which the existentialists have never given adequate attention, notwithstanding their view that the main question we must address is the existential question. Yet, I don't think we can deny that the whole discussion forces to think about which question is the principal one (in the sense of being the main question), not just in a chronological, but in an ontological, sense. This is where the existentialist view championed by Marcel and others (including Heidegger, Buber and Merleau-Ponty) is distinctive, because it claims first that the existentialist question is ontologically prior to the philosophical question (the question that generates a "problem").<sup>30</sup> In addition, second, the philosophical question cannot be fully understood without reference to the existential question. This is part of their general argument about the relationship between experience and reflection, and indeed leads to a kind of tension in existentialist thought in general between the two realms. The tension is especially acute when we consider the question of the *objective nature* of the realm of experience, which we must if we are to avoid subjectivism and relativism. In short, we need to be clear that when we make statements at the level of problems (the level of primary reflection) *about* the realm of experience, including about the nature and type of particular experiences, that these propositional-type statements are intended to be *objectively true*. (This applies also, of course, to the propositional statements *in Marcel's own work!*) This is the case even though we can acknowledge that the objective claims do not fully explain or capture the experiences, as we have noted with the experience of evil. I believe the existentialists struggled with regard to this matter; perhaps their general response and their discussions of the relationship between experience and reflection are not fully satisfactory, since they often sail close to the winds of relativism.

I have argued elsewhere that, among the existentialists, Marcel developed one of the most effective ways of responding to these concerns.<sup>31</sup> For Marcel, the level of conceptual knowledge (what he calls primary reflection) is in fact the level where we can obtain *objective knowledge*. We are prompted to move to this level by the deeper level of experience. When we move to the level of conceptual knowledge in the act of reflection, there is nothing going on in the relationship between our beliefs and the world that would relativize our knowledge claims. That which might be responsible for relativizing knowledge, the contextual situation of the subject, is precisely what is set aside in the act of abstraction. And so the concepts employed at the theoretical level are objective in two crucial senses. First, they represent essential features of the objects of experience (at an abstract level) as they really are in the objects, and second, these

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<sup>30</sup> For more on Buber's view, see my, "Martin Buber's Epistemology," *International Philosophical Quarterly* Vol.XLI, No.2 (June 2001), pp.145–160.

<sup>31</sup> See the discussion on the question of the objectivity of knowledge in my *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel*, pp.39-51.

essential features are also objective in the important sense that they are understood by everyone in the same way.

This is true not only for our conceptual analysis of ordinary objects and their properties (such as physical objects), but also for concepts that strive to correspond to experiences (including intersubjective experiences), such as evil, guilt, remorse, redemption, fidelity, hope, love, betrayal, and so forth. Conceptual knowledge strives to capture common objective elements to these experiences even though the experience itself is manifested differently for individuals based on their context and circumstances. Marcel spends a good deal of time illustrating this point in his work with the examples of fidelity and hope.<sup>32</sup> His main point is that the realm of objective knowledge, of conceptual abstraction (primary reflection,) cannot do justice to these experiences, but nevertheless they are *objective* experiences which can be “known” by the individual at a level of existential contact that is beyond the mind and the concept it grasps (which he tries to flesh out with the difficult notion of secondary reflection).<sup>33</sup> There is a big difference between claiming that the experience of hope is manifested differently for different people in different circumstances, and claiming that the experience of hope is subjective to each person. Marcel denies the latter claim; the former claim includes the view that there is an objective description of hope, an objective dimension to it, a core to it, with which everyone who experiences it is familiar. So this realm is best then described as mysterious, not because it is unknowable or esoteric, but because it must be experienced to be fully known. The recognition of mystery is, as Marcel puts it, an essentially positive act of the mind.<sup>34</sup> Although he is often vague, he is not a subjectivist about these various human experiences (a typical charge against existentialism); this position would invite charges of irrationalism, and would subordinate reason and objective truth to personal subjectivity, a move that Marcel struggled against and one which he always resisted.

By way of conclusion then, suppose we took the view that there is no solution to the philosophical problem of evil, or no very satisfactory solution, meaning that, like for most philosophical debates, there is no agreed upon answer, and so we should not bother with the philosophical question at all. This will not work as a response, because *I* may think one or other solution is successful or at least very plausible, and this may be enough for it to be efficacious *for me*. From this point of view, the existential experience may play a crucial role in the sense that a response which appears to help me and to make sense out of my experiences may appeal to me in a way that it might not appeal to others, and in a way that it might not appeal to those who are looking at the matter only from the point of view of the philosophical problem.

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<sup>32</sup> See in particular his essays in *Creative Fidelity* and also his “Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysics of Hope,” in *Homo Viator*, trans. by Emma Craufurd and Paul Seaton (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2010) [essay orig. 1942], pp.23-61 ; also his “Desire and Hope,” in N. Lawrence and D. O’Connor (eds.), *Readings in Existential Philosophy* (Englewood, Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967), pp.277-285; also, Cheng-Ling Yu, “Hope and Despair: A discussion of the Atheistic Existentialist, Evolutionary Biologicistic and Intersubjective account of Hope,” *Marcel Studies*, Vol 5.1. (2020), pp. 19-36.

<sup>33</sup> For more on this notion, see Thomas Michaud, “Secondary Reflection and Marcelian Anthropology,” *Philosophy Today*, Vol.34 (1990), pp. 222–228; Kenneth Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham U.P., 1962), pp. 41ff; David Applebaum, *Contact and Attention: The Anatomy of Gabriel Marcel’s Metaphysical Method* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, 1986); Thomas Busch, *Circulating Being: Essays in later Existentialism* (New York: Fordham U.P., 1999), pp. 28–42; Clyde Pax, “Philosophical Reflection: Gabriel Marcel,” *The New Scholasticism*, Vol. XXXVIII (1964), pp.159-177; Brendan Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel*, pp. 55-60.

<sup>34</sup> See *BH*, p.118.

Nevertheless, we should not go as far as to deny the possibility of a general solution, a philosophical solution, a solution at the level of problems. For there is another reason the philosophy of religion is useful, one of the main reasons that people practice it. It is useful in the debate with secularism, concerning the matter of the overall rationality of each view. In that debate, the question of evil is an important one that must be considered. Here is an instructive remark in Marcel that is germane to this point: "...the more unconditional my faith is, the more genuine it will be... If I yield to this temptation [to falter in the face of evil], shall I not thereby reveal that my faith implied an unacknowledged condition?"<sup>35</sup> An authentic faith, he continues, will allow us to repel this temptation; one that is usually yielded to because we believe in abstract theological statements.

Now, it sounds here as if he is offering a rational argument, an argument at the level of reflection. It is an argument defending the point that a conditional faith is problematic (in this case, the "condition" is a solution to the problem of evil). However, there is a good objection to Marcel's claim here and one which brings out the ambiguity of his approach, and his general failure to deal with these issues head on. The objection is that an unconditional faith is dangerous, since it makes it difficult to distinguish between a rational worldview and an irrational worldview, if we do not insist at least on the *general condition* of making our best efforts to defend our worldview rationally. This work is undertaken in philosophy of religion. Moreover, a plausible response to the question of evil or a developed theodicy would contribute to the general case for the rationality of theism. And a plausible case for the general rationality of theism would surely help many to engage more fruitfully with the existential experience of evil.

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<sup>35</sup> *The Mystery of Being*, Vol.2, trans. R. Hague (Chicago: Regnery, 1951), p.137.