

PHILOSOPHICAL NOTES

Hope and Despair in Marcel: Images and Underlying Attitudes

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Abstract: This article describes Marcel's phenomenology of hope, as contrasted with mere optimism and as distinguished from its opposite, metaphysical despair. Hope should be the constant foundation for our lives in a broken world, but becomes especially relevant in times of great crisis when I am threatened with despair. Hope involves an openness to another in whom I have a patient trust, even though I don't see the solution to the crisis I am in. Despair refuses to rely on another and demands to see a solution now. Despair is isolating, crippling in its repudiation of trust, and rejects the message of hope inherent in the world of values and of persons worthy of love. Hope involves virtue and moral character, humbly putting my confidence in him who is deserving of it. Despair is self-assertive and demanding, wishing to rule and dominate, ultimately betraying the other in whom I should lovingly rest. Communion with others in shared goodness, beauty, and joy is the end of hope, whereas despair results in isolation, resentment, ugliness, and misery. These ultimate ends of man are foreshadowed in our earthly experience of hope and despair.

Introduction

I wish to compare hope and despair, experientially described by Gabriel Marcel, as to their underlying attitudes, final goals, and working images for us who are "on the way" through this life in time. We take our inspiration primarily from his great work *Homo Viator*, *Introduction to the Metaphysic of Hope*.

To begin with Marcel, we should first distinguish between hope and a mere "optimism" (or a "pessimism" on the same plane). Both optimism and pessimism are more psychological tendencies based in oneself—some see the glass half-empty, some see it half-full. So optimism is centered in oneself.¹ On the other hand, genuine hope opens onto a transcendent source—someone who can help—in whom we hope in light of his power and his goodness. Openness and transcendence are key here, as well as the person who is hoped in—*trusting in him* is at the center of the act of hope, i.e., hope is not self-enclosed. This means that hope, even in extremely negative circumstances, can remain realistic, due to the fact that it relies on assistance from

¹ See Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to the Metaphysics of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd and Paul Seaton (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2010), pp. 23-62. He writes, "To go on..., we should say that the optimism (or for the matter of that, the pessimism which does not really differ from it) remains strictly in the province of the 'I myself'" (p. 28). (Hereinafter, *HV*.)

above. In comparison, optimism can become unrealistic, if an anticipated event becomes a center for longing and we let our longings overrule our reason.

Images for Hope and Despair

Turning to hope and despair, let us begin with powerful “images” of each. For hope, the image could be oneself and one’s beloved lying in a sleeping bag together, looking up at the stars and talking of their future. (Think of them as *newlyweds* if you want to stay on the right side of the moral ledger!) Marcel himself cites a pregnant woman as a powerful natural image of hope: “The woman who is expecting a baby, for instance, is literally inhabited by hope” (*HV*, 28).² In contrast to these positive images, a representation for despair might be a person lying in a coffin with the lid closed. This shows forth the fact that there is no communal aspect to despair: you are alone. This does not mean, of course, that your despair cannot be “catching” to others. As Alice von Hildebrand was fond of saying, “Many sicknesses are contagious; health is not. It is regrettable, but it is a fact.”³ And despair, as Kierkegaard so rightly stresses in *The Sickness unto Death*, is a disease of the spirit.⁴ On the other hand, hope always has a communal aspect; it is not just for oneself but for others, especially those whom we are called to unite with in love. Marcel captures this communal aspect of hope with his concise description of genuine hope, “I hope in Thee for us.” (*HV*, 54). Let us look more closely at the differences between hope and despair.

Hope vs. Despair, Being vs. Having

Hope essentially involves love and trust, not so with despair. Indeed, it is the *person hoped in* who is at the core of the former, whereas in despair it is *my wishes* which are at the center, together with my fears and resentments at the conditions threatening to snuff out those wishes. Thus, there is a certain freedom or suppleness characteristic of hope. Marcel says, “Hope has the power of making things fluid” (*HV*, 54), whereas in despair I feel threatened by an overwhelming determinism; I feel “boxed in” because my dreams are dying. In contrast, by *trusting in another who can help*, though I don’t know exactly how, I can experience a certain confidence and security, even in the midst of terrible circumstances. However, when tempted to despair, my tendency is to set my own limits on what a “solution” would have to look like for me to accept it. I try to exert control over the situation. This relates to a broader theme in Marcel’s thought: being vs. having, i.e., being with another person in loving trust vs. trying to “have” or possess another person as if he or she (or even God) were a thing to be manipulated.⁵

² Such a description highlights in a special way, of course, the tragedy and the horror of abortion—the utter dashing of hopes.

³ She begins her article “The Disease of Irreverence,” *New Oxford Review*, June, 2011, with this line. Available at: <https://www.alicevonhildebrand.org/post/the-disease-of-irreverence>

⁴ See Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1968). In *The Sickness Unto Death*, he notes that “That Despair is the Sickness Unto Death, A. Despair is a Sickness in the Spirit, in the Self, and So It May Assume a Triple Form: in Despair at Not Being Conscious of Having a Self (Despair Improperly So Called); in Despair at Not Willing to Be Oneself; and in Despair at Willing to be Oneself” (p. 146). He later calls the despair at not willing to be oneself a despair of weakness (p. 182) and the despair at willing to be oneself a despair of defiance (p. 200).

⁵ See Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. K. Ferrer (Boston: Beacon, 1951).

Trust vs. Treason

Thus, in the highest form of hope (i.e., supernatural hope), we find the response of a creature to the Absolute Being to Whom we owe all that we are; thus, our trust in Him must be complete, with no conditions. So, we hope for certain events (e.g., a beloved person's recovery from cancer), but with a *deeply caring* acceptance of God's will (trusting in his goodness, power, and wisdom). This is not apathy or stoicism; it is trust. Hope, then, is an expression of a vibrant loyalty, affirming an ongoing reciprocal communion and witnessing to others of this deep bond: again, "I hope in Thee for us" (*HV*, 54).⁶ In contrast, according to Marcel, despair is literally an act of treason in holding that God has withdrawn from me—an attitude that can never truly be justified. Think of great examples from the Old Testament like the patience of Job, of Joseph sold into Egypt, of Esther, of Judith, of Tobias (actually, it was Tobias' wife who had most of the worries and doubts, but he held firm in his hope and trust). Thus, despair is an act of supreme disloyalty, which in its negativity tends to drag others down collectively—again, like a contagion or a disease.

Inner Experience of Despair and of Hope

In his disappointment and resentment, the one tempted to despair tends to harden against the values and goods of life, against all values, against all that is worthy of loving affirmation, commitment, and faithfulness. Then, in order to further ground and justify his attitude, the despairing one may try to actively "not care" about life, either his or others. His disappointment and resentment can blossom into anger and hatred for all—sometimes leading to horrific events that we read about regularly in the news, lashing out at others and trying to destroy their lives and goods because one's own dreams have been dashed. This leads to a state akin to hell—remembering that St. Thomas Aquinas says that the two prevailing attitudes in hell are hatred and envy,⁷ including the desire to destroy others out of spite.

On the other hand, in concrete expression, hope *awaits the gift* (e.g., of deliverance) without knowing the form it will take or whether it will be in time or in eternity. But, most significantly, hope does not try to "chain" the giver. In contrast, the one on the road to despair demands a solution *my way and in my time*. The tendency in the latter is to say, "I'll follow you, I'll accept you, I'll 'trust' you only if you do this for me." Here, we have a complete reversal of priorities, yet if the despairer's demand is not met then this disappointment is used to accuse God. In genuine hope, there is no such bargaining or "trading off," but rather a total self-gift, putting all in the hands of the one you rely on. Marcel calls this "disponibilité": i.e.,

⁶ Here a longer, more explanatory quote is helpful: "'I hope in thee for us'...is perhaps the most adequate and the most elaborate expression of the act which the verb 'to hope' suggests.... 'In thee—for us': between this 'thou' and this 'us' which only the most persistent reflection can finally discover in the act of hope, what is the vital link? Must we not reply that 'Thou' is in some way the guarantee of the union which holds us together, myself to myself, or the one to the other, or these beings with other beings? More than a guarantee which secures or confirms from outside a union which already exists, it is the cement which binds the whole into one. If this is the case, to despair of myself, or to despair of us, is essentially to despair of the Thou.... This absolute Thou [is one] in whom I must hope but whom I also have always the possibility of denying, not only in theory but in practice...." (pp. 54-55).

⁷ See *Summa Theologica*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Vol. Three (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), *Supplementum*, Q.98, a. 4 ad 3, where St. Thomas says, "Although an increase in the number of the damned results in an increase of each one's punishment, so much the more will their hatred and envy increase that they will prefer to be more tormented with many than less tormented alone" (p. 3004).

“availability” to God and to others in trust and in service (See *HV*, 7-23; 17-20). The danger on the road to despair is that one begins to close off in a self-consuming, dizzying descent, a downward “vertigo” of mistrust based on the implied claim *that all should go my way*, that my dreams should come true. If not, this disappointment breeds anger, resentment, and rebellion (like a child still caught in the “terrible twos”) and reinforces what Marcel calls “egolatry (*HV*, 14), i.e., being clogged up with oneself.

Virtue and Vice

All this rises to the level of virtue and vice when we realize that we have an obligation to trust in the all-good God—He Who deserves this response even though His ways are not our ways. Thus, hope is not just an inclination or a tendency, but a decision and a virtue. Yet hope, like love, can be rejected. This becomes sin when it involves rebellion against a trust deserved, choosing despair over oneself, and even despair over God Himself. The temptation here is to say “even God cannot or will not help me”—at least, not in the way that I demand. In this light, despair, like hatred, can be chosen. This dynamic becomes especially apparent in times of particular crisis, but since—after the Fall—our life itself in this world is a trial and a captivity, then hope is not just relevant in times of acute crisis, but rather hope becomes a continual foundation for each of our lives. Conversely, despair becomes an ever-present temptation during our journey in this world. Marcel writes: “...I shall always be exposed to the temptation of shutting the door which encloses me within myself and at the same time encloses me within time....” (*HV*, 54). And again: “This absolute Thou ... is at the heart of the city which I form with myself and which, as experience has given tragic proof, retains the power of reducing itself to ashes” (*HV*, 55).

Moral Character

It is worth comparing at this point the radically different moral character of the man of hope compared to the man of despair. The one who hopes, Marcel says, is silent and modest, even timid about himself, not pretentious or defiant of reality, yet he is nonetheless powerful—only because he has grounded his life in the Absolute Thou.⁸ Thus, time for the man of hope has an opening upward toward eternity. He is receptive to creative help from God, though he knows not how it might come. This lack of specific knowledge, however, does not worry him—since it is more God’s business than his own how and when the aid will be given.⁹ On the other hand, the one in despair becomes cynically self-assertive, human calculation reigns supreme. His problem is “bigger than God,” he is closed off to transcendence, to mystery, to trust. Time is experienced as a closed, repetitive, and imprisoning system—“as though the future, drained of its substance and its mystery, were no longer to be anything but a place of pure repetition, as though some unspecifiable disordered mechanism were to go on working ceaselessly, undirected by any intelligent motivation (check word)” (*HV*, 54).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.29. Here Marcel speaks of “all that there is of humility, of timidity, of *chastity* in the true character of hope” (Marcel’s italics). In this passage, he is in the process of distinguishing hope from presumption.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.45. He further notes that, “He who hopes says simply: ‘It [i.e., an answer, a solution] will be found.’ In hoping, I do not create in the strict sense of the word, but I appeal to the existence of a certain creative power....”; and “It might be said that in a sense hope is not interested in the *how*....” (pp. 45-46).

That hope is grounded in humility is evidenced by this *openness to receiving* from above and from another. Such an attitude builds a spiritual vitality; that is, hope overcomes, though not by one's own strength. This, then, allows the man of hope to discover and to hold onto his true self, to take a position—trusting in Him Who deserves it—which at the same time safeguards his own integrity. This is illustrated, for example, in Galadriel's great trial in *The Lord of the Rings* when she resists the temptation of pride and of the Ring ("All shall love me and despair"). She concludes, with a startled joy, "I pass the test. I will diminish and go into the West *and remain Galadriel*."¹⁰

In contrast, despair is the offspring of presumption—putting myself and my wishes at the core of my life, building my own expectations into a false absolute. Thus, the more it looks like I might not get my wish, the more I am tempted to go to pieces, to give up, to capitulate to "fate." Fear and panic predominate: "there's no way out, I'm trapped," is the experience. I begin to not only accept, but to anticipate, my own self-destruction. This is the state of mind of Denethor in his suicidal despair in *The Return of the King*, as he capitulates to the threat of the Dark Lord. He says to Gandalf, "I have seen more than thou knowest, Grey Fool. For thy hope is but ignorance...against the Power that rises there is no victory."¹¹ He attempts to take his son Faramir with him to death on the pyre. Faramir is saved but Denethor insists on his own self-immolation.

Crippling Resentment vs. Patient Trust

Denethor's case shows that despair is crippling, impatient, tends toward violence, and is increasingly uptight and tense. It is filled with angst and worry, with a false fascination dragging oneself and others down. It anticipates a negative repetition and is closed off, ultimately rejecting God as Lord of Time.¹² At its height then, despair includes even a longing for self-annihilation—not really as a "solution," but as a final outrage. It is a self-consuming, stifling state of mind in which one turns on oneself. By contrast, hope embraces patience—with oneself, with others, and ultimately with God. This patience, however, does not involve a stoic indifference,¹³ but a deep

¹⁰ Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: William Morrow: HarperCollins, 2021), *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book Two, Chapter VII ("The Mirror of Galadriel"), p. 366 (my emphasis).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, *The Lord of the Rings, The Return of the King*, Book Five, Chapter VII ("The Pyre of Denethor"), p. 854.

¹² Dietrich von Hildebrand reflects wonderfully on the implications of God as "Lord of Time" in his chapter on "Holy Patience" in his classic *Transformation in Christ* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2001), pp. 315-336. The impatient man insults God by losing his trust in Him if a solution is delayed. Von Hildebrand writes, "Above all, the true Christian never pretends to a false position of supremacy over the Universe. Christian patience issues from *religio*: the consciousness of being a creature of God, whose property we are, without whom we can achieve nothing, and in whose hands all our endeavors, actions, and accomplishments are placed. The true Christian assents to his creaturely dependence on God....He knows that God is also the Lord over Time...." (pp. 326-327). Kierkegaard puts his finger on this problem in his *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (New York: Harper, Torch Books), noting, "So it is with all impatience. It is a kind of ill-temper. Its root is already in the child, because the child will not take time for things. With the double-minded one, it is thus clear that time and eternity cannot rule in the same man. He cannot, he will not, understand the Good's slowness: that out of mercy, the Good is slow; that out of love for free persons, it will not use force; that in its wisdom toward the frail ones, it shrinks from any deception. He cannot, he will not, humbly understand that the Good can get on without him. He is double-minded, he that with his enthusiasm could apparently become an apostle, but can quite as readily become a Judas, who treacherously wishes to hasten the victory of the good" (pp. 99-100).

¹³ Marcel, in *Homo Viator*, acknowledges a certain isolated greatness to stoic individualism, but also its terrible limits: "I shall rise infinitely above this *fatum*'....Herein without a doubt lies the power and greatness of

peace even in the midst of threats and trials, knowing that all this is part of the interpersonal drama of life with others and with God. Thus, the man of hope must detach himself, not from the threat, but from the “cramp” of inner determinism. He can remain “fluid” and open to future possibilities, indirectly, through the person hoped in. In this perspective, the self is seen as a living flame meant to face events and trials, enduring while continuing to grow and develop. (*HV*,140).¹⁴ The man of hope does not atrophy and close up within himself.

Experiential Grounds for Ultimate Hope

Metaphysically, of course, the ground for an ultimate hope lies in an ever clearer understanding of God as all-powerful, all-good, and all-wise. But where do we find the well-springs and intimations of such metaphysical truths in human experience? This is Marcel’s emphasis, rather than the metaphysical proofs themselves or even the higher illumination of Faith. He sees the experiential beginnings of hope in the most deeply valid attitudes we affirm in responding to true values (objective goods built into being) and especially in the truth of the call to love—and to commitment, faithfulness, and communion with other persons. These experiences lift us up and point us in the right direction. “Value,” he says, “is the very substance of exaltation” (*HV*, 135) And, “if I dedicate my life to serve some cause where a supreme value is involved, by this fact my life receives from the value itself a consecration, which delivers it from the vicissitudes of history” (*HV*, 134).

The deepest and most far-reaching value response, of course, is the response to the highest value we perceive in this world, which is—according to Marcel—the value of the incarnate human person, and especially in our experience, the value of the most beloved human person. Marcel’s point is that love is metaphysically justified, that it is true and genuinely based, and therefore so is our commitment and our fidelity. This means that love is not just a projection of needs or a product of imaginative desire. Marcel’s point is that the truth of love has consequences. For example, if love is true and valid, then the beloved must be more than the body. Why? Because the body is, chemically considered, 62% water and 38% “other” (protein, fat, minerals, carbohydrates). But that chemical composition cannot be the ultimate ground of my love.

If the beloved is nothing but the body, then she (in this case, I believe Marcel is thinking of his wife, whom he so deeply loved) is really just a highly organized mud puddle. But this would make love absurd! What does it mean for one mud puddle to make a life-long commitment of loving faithfulness and service to another mud puddle! Yet love is the deepest

stoicism, but, at the same time, it must be recognized that the stoic is always imprisoned within himself. He strengthens himself, no doubt, but he does not radiate. I would go as far as to say that he affords us the highest expression, the greatest degree of sublimation of the ‘I myself.’ He bears himself—and that means that above all he controls his interior life—as though he had no neighbors, as though he were concerned only with himself and had no responsibility towards anyone else” (p. 32).

¹⁴ As a further explanation, Marcel adds that, “...certain metaphors furnish us with settings for the human experience ‘to exist’ to such a point that we have the right to regard them as veritable concrete categories. It is on this flame, which is life, that the malevolent action of despair is exercised. We might say to put it another way that ardour renders soluble or volatile what without it would at every moment tend to prevent existence. It is turned towards a certain matter in the personal *becoming* which it is its function to consume. Where, however, “the evil spell” exists, this flame turns away from the matter which is its natural food, to devour itself. This is what we express admirably when we say of a being ‘he preys on himself.’ From this point of view, despair can be compared to a certain spiritual autophagy. We must notice here, and keep in mind for all that follows, the part played by the *self*, that action which consists not only of reflecting but of making the self the centre” (*HV*, 37-38).

and most meaningful response of our lives; therefore, the beloved (and each human person) must be more than a glorified mud puddle. Therefore, as a corollary, death cannot be taken to be the ultimate annihilation of the human person. According to Marcel, “To love a being is to say you, you in particular, will never die.” (*HV*, 140).¹⁵ He is not denying the physical fact of death, he’s just denying that death can be interpreted merely as some kind of neutral scientific fact of no further consequence. He’s saying that to think of death as the final annihilation of the beloved, and then to act *as if* this is to be treated with indifference, is an act of treason—betraying the truth of love and the reality of the beloved. He is objecting to a reductionistic materialism that denies the *mystery* of death, a mystery to which Marcel thinks we must stay alive. Later, he adds: “...we might say very simply that if death is a silence we cannot mark its boundaries....The fallacy, the treason, consists in interpreting this silence as nonexistence, as a decline into non-being” (*HV*, 141). He says that “if death is the ultimate reality, value is annihilated in mere scandal, reality is pierced to the heart” (*HV*, 145). That is, in this view, value promises what it cannot deliver, it is a lie—and *the same with love*.

But *the hope* is that the metaphysical truth of love (affirming the being and value of the beloved as a person, united as one with the body yet not reducible to the body) reveals a spiritual reality pointing upward toward God as the origin and end of each of incarnate human person and of the promise of our loving communion together. He notes: “Yes, it is indeed here that invocation arises, that an appeal for help to the Absolute Thou is articulated. I have never ceased repeating this many and many a time” (*HV*, 140). Marcel focuses these thoughts near the end of his chapter on “Value and Immortality” in *Homo Viator*, in which he asks us to consider the part played in this longing for full communion with the beloved by the appeal to absolute transcendence:

Is it possible to conceive of a real personal survival independently of this transcendence? I think that my reply would be as follows: there is no human love worthy of the name which does not represent for him who exercises it both a pledge and a seed of immortality: but, on the other hand, it is really not possible to exercise this love without discovering that it cannot constitute a closed system, that it passes beyond itself in every direction, that it really demands for its complete realization a universal communion outside which it cannot be satisfied and is destined to be corrupted and lost in the end. Moreover, this universal communion itself can only be centered upon an Absolute Thou (*HV*, 145).

This of course recalls the conclusion of the earlier chapter: “I hope in Thee for us” (*HV*, 54).

Consequences of a Denial of Hope and of Communion

At this point we must ask, with Marcel, what is the alternative to accepting (either on faith or through the evidences of experience) a final spiritual communion with others in God? Remember our opening image of despair: lying in a coffin with the lid closed. This is the end of despair: solitary confinement in one’s own little corner of misery, even of hell. And yet, this is

¹⁵ Marcel goes on at this point, “For me this is not merely a sentence in a play, it is an affirmation which it is not given to us to transcend. To consent to the death of a being is in a sense to give him up to death. Moreover, I should like to be able to show that again here it is the spirit of truth which forbids us to make this surrender, this betrayal” (*HV*, 140).

the end that the atheistic absurdists (Sartre, Camus) would have us pursue—in resentment, in rebellion, in denial, and in false self-sufficiency. Marcel writes, at the conclusion of the chapter on Sartre in *Homo Viator*:

Perhaps it should be added that the act by which the philosopher...shuts himself within the narrow circle of immanence, denying any other world or after life, appears in the last analysis much less as the expression of reason made wise by experience and ever ready to learn from it, than as the Luciferian refusal with which a rebellious individuality, intoxicated with itself, spurns the signs and calls to which Love alone could make it sensitive (*HV* 176-77).

In his chapter covering Camus in *Homo Viator*, Marcel even opines that the “stance” of atheistic absurdity is not really even a philosophical position open to genuine argumentation. Rather, he describes it as a “contagion,” a disease of the “hardened will” which we must guard ourselves against for our spiritual health. He describes three main ways in which this “contagion,” this “evil thing” as he calls it, can infiltrate us. First, one can catch this disease by getting “stuck” in the “claim” that I should never entertain any possible solution to life’s evils and disappointments, that I should refuse to ever allow myself to be consoled, as if openness to even the hint of a possible solution were a betrayal, the “betrayal” of the “triumph” of evil (a la Denethor) (See *HV*, 200-203).

Second, this disease can reach us by being overwhelmed by such devastating events in our lives or those of others “in such a way that we no longer see anything stretching around us but the undefined no man’s land of universal inanity” (*HV*, 201). However, Marcel concludes this as not really a valid or genuine position; it arbitrarily and completely ignores and shuts out the real signs of hope. Rather, he says, “I find it hard not to believe that we are really considering a delusion which is perhaps a dramatized version of vertigo” (*HV*, 201). That is, the afflicted one mesmerizes himself into the vertigo of despair and accuses everyone else of a lack of realism.

Thirdly, we can be infiltrated with this disease of absurdity and despair through what Marcel calls the “*tedium vita*, the boredom and disgust with living”, which can wear us down over time and threatens to undermine what he calls “the ontological bond which unites each particular being to Being in its fullness” or again, the “nuptial bond” between man and life (*HV*, 203).

Marcel concludes, about Camus and others like him:

...it is nothing but a pure and simple imposture to claim to hold up as some unheard-of metaphysical promotion or as a triumph of pure lucidity the really blinding gesture by which all that humanity has ever acquired is swept away and we are thrust headlong into a Narcissism of nothingness, where we are left with no other resource but to wonder tirelessly at our courage, our pride and our stubbornness in denying both God and the being full of weakness and hope which in spite of everything and forever—we are (*HV*, 204)

Conclusion: “We are” ... “Uplifted”

In conclusion, Marcel would ask us to remember that philosophy begins not merely in “*Sum*” (I am), but in “*Sursum*” (I am lifted up): He observes:

Or again, if we no longer consider things from outside but from within, that is to say from the point of view of the person himself, it does not seem that strictly speaking he can say ‘I am’ of himself. He is aware of himself far less as a being than as a desire to rise above everything which he is and is not, above the actuality in which he really feels he is involved and has a part to play, but which does not satisfy him. For it falls short of the aspiration with which he identifies himself. His motto is not *sum* but *sursum* (*HV*, 20).

This “being lifted up” in *Sursum*, as described above, is grounded in the inspiring role of incarnate values and the call to love—and is also the deepest source of the “wondering” and “marveling”—at the unsuspected depth and richness of being—which is designated as the classical origin of philosophy.¹⁶

Furthermore, in Marcel’s philosophy, the starting point for the search for wisdom is “a metaphysic of *we are* as opposed to a metaphysic of *I think*.”¹⁷ But, he is thinking here more or Sartre than of Descartes:

It is most instructive to note in our own days that Sartre, who makes use of a cartesianism which in other ways he has mutilated (since he has deprived it of the theology which crowns it) is himself obliged to take the other only as a threat to my liberty; or, strictly speaking, as a possible source of seduction....When he writes, ‘Hell—that’s other people’, he supplies his own evidence of his impossible position; ...he can have no understanding of *philia* or *agape*;...only...of *eros*, with its formidable ambiguity, so far as it coincides with want or desire....”¹⁸

¹⁶ See Josef Pieper’s penetrating analysis of this phenomenon of wonder as the origin of philosophy, starting with reflections on Plato’s *Theaetetus*, in his *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), pp. 109-125. He concludes, with many parallels to Marcel: “It is because of the ambivalent structure of philosophy, because ‘marveling’ sets one on a road that never ends, because the structure of philosophy is that of hope, that to philosophize is so essentially human—and in a sense to philosophize means living a truly human life” (p. 125).

¹⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol.2, trans. R. Hague (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), p. 9. Earlier he notes, “To philosophize...may mean devoting myself to understanding my own life as fully as possible; and where I use the word ‘life’ in that connection, I could equally use the word ‘experience’. If I try to do so, I shall most likely be led to a strange and wonderful discovery—that the more I raise myself to a really concrete perception of my own experience, the more, by that very act, shall I be attuned to an effective understanding of others, of the experience of others. Nothing indeed can be more important and helpful than to realize this fully” (pp. 6-7). And again: “We must at the same time note well that this fullness of life can in no circumstances be considered in an exclusively private aspect, considered in as much as it is *just mine*; rather must it be that of a whole which is implied by the relation to the *with*, by the *togetherness*, on which [I have] laid such emphasis. The intersubjectivity at which we so painfully arrived must be, in fact, the ground upon which we must base ourselves for our further enquiries....” (pp. 8-9).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

By contrast, laying the emphasis on intersubjectivity and communion, Marcel notes that, “I claim to be a person in so far as I assume responsibility for what I do and what I say.... But to whom am I responsible?...both to myself and to everyone else, and...this conjunction is precisely characteristic of an engagement of the person,...it is the mark proper to the person” (*HV*, 15). Thus, it is in communion with others, grounded finally in communion with God, and in committed love, fidelity, and service throughout this life “on the way,” that I find myself. This foreshadows Pope St. John Paul II’s favorite quote from Vatican Council II, “Man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself,”¹⁹ and harkens back to Marcel’s experiential grounds for hope in the faithful commitment to love and values in answer to the threat of despair and absurdity. *Caritas urget nos.*²⁰

¹⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

²⁰ 2 Cor. 5:14.