

THE EXISTENTIAL APPROACH TO GOD IN KIERKEGAARD AND MARCEL: A CONCILIATORY STUDY

ANTHONY MALAGON,
Queens College,
City University of New York,
136-28 62nd Avenue,
Flushing, New York, 11367.
Amalagon22@gmail.com

Abstract: Thomas Anderson has argued that the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Marcel are mutually exclusive. He explains that although Kierkegaard and Marcel have much in common, their two paths are ultimately “fundamentally irreconcilable.” Although an ecumenical interpretation of these philosophers is rejected by Anderson, the following article attempts to challenge this view, and provide further reflection upon their approach to God. It undertakes a more detailed analysis of their supposed opposition, and defends the view that their differences are, in fact, typically misunderstood, exaggerated, or both, and that the judgment of mutual exclusivity is at very least not well founded, if not a misunderstanding of the common themes in both philosophers. The article explores the view that Kierkegaard and Marcel’s philosophies can, in the end, be reconciled in a fruitful way.

Introduction

Although scholarship on the relation between Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel is scant, there are some who have dealt with the issue, but have done so only cursorily, and have generally ended by emphasizing their differences rather than their commonalities. Professor Thomas C. Anderson has provided one of the best and thorough treatments of the matter, but has essentially suggested that their philosophies are mutually exclusive.¹ Anderson’s article, “The Experiential Paths to God in Kierkegaard and Marcel,” concludes with the statement, “I suspect... that the two paths are fundamentally irreconcilable.”² Indeed, this is the most common view of the relation between the two. This article, however, attempts to provide further reflection upon both philosophers’ approach to God and their supposed opposition to each other—since not enough clarity has been reached with respect to this issue in the philosophical literature as a whole. This article will seek to explore and defend the alternative and unorthodox view that, upon detailed analysis, it can be shown that their differences, although apparently irreconcilable, are typically misunderstood, or exaggerated, and that Anderson’s suspicion of mutual exclusivity may not be the only tenable position on the matter.³

¹ Thomas C. Anderson, “The Experiential Paths to God in Kierkegaard and Marcel,” *Philosophy Today* 26 (1982), p.37.

² *Ibid.*

³ I am aware that even Marcel attempted to distinguish himself from Kierkegaard, yet I believe his criticism of Kierkegaard was also based upon a misinterpretation; hence, my contention is also against Marcel’s own view. I hold that their differences lay elsewhere and that they are not substantial.

Let it be clear at the outset, however, that it is not my intention to render Anderson's work as merely emphasizing their differences. On the contrary, his important analysis is a brilliant summary and comparison of their respective philosophies, and, in fact, outlines the many ways in which Kierkegaard and Marcel are also in agreement.⁴ It is also not my intent to simply provide a critique of Anderson's essay. However, given that his essay is likely the best exposition of the common view, it will be useful to revisit the specific ways in which he thinks that Kierkegaard and Marcel's ideas are incompatible in order to explore whether the non-ecumenical interpretation can be challenged and re-directed toward a new understanding of their philosophical relation. That is to say, I will be using Anderson as a frame of reference from which to explore in detail the common view of Kierkegaard and Marcel.

Even though we could generally accept their agreement with respect to certain aspects of our fundamental condition in the world, such as our need for God, according to Anderson, the way we are ultimately to receive the gift of God that remedies our despair and brokenness is quite different in both philosophers. For instance, one seemed to recommend solitude and inward passion in relation to God, or the eternal, and the other seemed to suggest that adequate access to God is through a proper relation and openness to the other, and that in this communion with others we find our way back to God—or re-establish our rooted-ness in Being.⁵ One also seemed to emphasize pure passion, seemingly against reason, while the other seemed friendly toward the use of our intellect, or reason, to come to God. Finally, while one seemed to view God as utterly transcendent and far from contact with man, except by grace, the other seemed to view God as immanent and extremely close to man, so that God and man are almost indistinguishable from each other. These can be regarded as the central issues upon which Anderson bases his claim about incompatibility, and which I shall attempt to respond to in what follows.

My mode of approach will be to divide my analysis into four parts and address each of these three claims. In the next section, I will highlight what I take to be two sources of misunderstanding: (a) an insufficient consideration of Kierkegaard's signed texts, and other textual subtleties in both thinkers, and (b) a lack of clarity with respect to their historical context and their distinct goals. In the third section, I will proceed to show how Kierkegaard and Marcel are not so clearly at odds with each other with respect to how we should relate to God, i.e., individually or through the other (i.e., the community). The fourth section of the paper will attempt to illustrate how their respective uses of reason in the approach to God is also not as distant as it might first appear, and the last section will show that Kierkegaard's God is not so transcendent as to be incompatible with Marcel's God, and *vice versa*. My overall goal is to demonstrate that in each case they are not as far apart as they may at first appear, and that in the end, one need not necessarily *choose* between being a Kierkegaardian or a Marcelian, but one

⁴ Here is a brief summary of their agreement according to Anderson: (a) they both hold the view that we are generally in a condition of despair or brokenness, (b) this brokenness or despair is remedied by a re-establishment of the proper relation or connection to the ground of our Being, that is, to God, and (c) that this restoring of our relation to Being, or God, must occur by a kind of surrender of ourselves to this higher, transcendent reality; in other words, we must surrender and realize that we do not belong to ourselves, as Marcel would put it, and that we are nothing or are to become nothing before God (i.e., surrender), à la Kierkegaard, and this is how we properly, or truly, relate to God in order to remedy despair, and ultimately d) our brokenness can only be healed by and through God, that is, the healing or restoration is achieved only by grace, and not by our own power.

⁵ It is important to note that Marcel equates Being with God, and refers to God as a Thou, or more specifically, as an absolute Thou—clearly suggesting that Being, or the absolute, has a personal quality inherent in it, though he does not provide much details about its nature.

could follow both. If my arguments are persuasive, we will have shown that Kierkegaard and Marcel are not as far apart in their respective philosophies as it is usually believed.

The Misunderstanding

The general intuition, or insight, with which I begin this essay, is that the major differences between Kierkegaard and Marcel that shall be discussed are not substantial, but are only differences of interests and emphases. My approach, then, will be an ecumenical one: that although on the surface they appear to contradict one another, at bottom, they are fundamentally in agreement, and one need only wonder why they have been so often interpreted, or misunderstood, as being opposed to one another. It is the purpose of this section to offer two suggestions in answer to this question: one textual, the other historical.

The textual cause of confusion can be summarized as the fact that both of these philosophers' works are rich with subtle distinctions and nuances from text to text, which make it difficult for any reader to come away with a clear sense of their intended meaning, especially if a larger perspective of their work is not taken. If one is not careful, it is quite easy to take a passage on its own and misunderstand its meaning if it is not considered in conjunction with other texts and in the context of their complete philosophical perspectives. The historical source of confusion can be summarized as the fact that their respective philosophical and social atmosphere inclined each toward a particular goal or intention in their work, which results in determining the tenor of their work in such a way as to make them appear to have opposed views. Both of these elements, then, must come into play when attempting a comparative reading of these philosophers: an awareness of their entire textual corpus, the historical background of their writing, and thus, the particular audience they each had in mind given the specific milieu in which they wrote. An awareness of these factors, then, can in large part explain their seeming differences as a difference of emphasis rather than of content.⁶

⁶ One might add yet another reason for the apparent misunderstanding, as an extension of the historical element. This is the religious framework within which each of these philosophers is writing. Recalling the fact that they had different purposes in mind when writing, it might be useful to note that Kierkegaard made a distinction between different kinds of religiousness, religiousness A and B, and further, that Marcel makes a strikingly similar distinction. Religiousness A is a more generic mode of religiousness for Kierkegaard, which he sometimes described as immanent religiousness, since God is viewed as inside the person and need not be strictly speaking Christian, while religiousness B is the religion of the absolute paradox, Christianity. This is significant since it could be argued that in light of the fact that Marcel denied that we can truly philosophize about a specific revealed religion, such as Christianity, then he and Kierkegaard were actually speaking past each other, that Kierkegaard was speaking of Christianity and of the Christian faith, and Marcel of the generally religious, which can be experienced by anyone without belonging to any specific religion. Indeed, Anderson himself supports such a view. There are places where Anderson describes Kierkegaard's notion of religiousness A in terms that are almost identical to that of Marcel; for instance, he states that "religiousness A maintains that in one essential dimension of his being man participates in the eternal realm of God," which is a language endemic to that of Marcel's descriptions of God and His relation to man. (Anderson, "The Experiential Paths to God in Kierkegaard and Marcel," p.27). He also explains religiousness A as the religiousness of immanence and quotes passages from Kierkegaard that suggest that God, at this stage, can be viewed as being inside a person. If this is so, from the Kierkegaardian framework, and using his terminology, one could perhaps argue that Marcel was generally working within religiousness A, and not specifically interested in religiousness B, i.e., Christianity. Anderson writes that Marcel was concerned with the generally religious in his philosophical analysis and that the latter—the specifically religious person, such as the Christian—is outside of the scope of philosophy altogether. He writes: "Marcel...makes a very important distinction between two types of faith, of revelation, and of religion. One refers to faith in God or revelation in general which can be present in someone

Indeed, in interpreting Kierkegaard, for instance, it is important to consider his corpus as a whole, i.e., his signed works, his pseudonymous works, and his journals as well. To do so, would ensure that we come closer to a proper understanding of his philosophy; to not do so would make us liable to misunderstanding Kierkegaard through avoidable errors such as taking his pseudonymous works at face value and confusing these views with Kierkegaard's own, or not understanding the context or intention within which the work was written. Hence, in my argument, I have considered some of Kierkegaard's signed works, especially *Works of Love*,⁷ as well as some of his journal entries, in order to make it easier to discern his true views and intentions. If we consider *WOL*, for instance, it becomes quite obvious that many of the usual criticisms hauled against Kierkegaard completely miss the mark, for there we see that he expresses his views much more clearly and directly.⁸ Some might even argue that while the pseudonymous works appear to emphasize individuality, the irrationality of faith and the transcendence of God, his non-pseudonymous writings such as *WOL* do the exact opposite and have a more communitarian, rational and immanent slant.⁹ This, then, shows how easily the matter can become complicated and can lead to the kinds of misunderstandings that this essay is attempting to ameliorate.

Furthermore, one might also understand the supposed differences between Kierkegaard and Marcel as arising out of their respective interests, foci, and individual goals, which in turn were born out of their respective historical milieus. It is well known that Kierkegaard was a Lutheran Christian addressing himself to his intellectual contemporaries, who were mainly Christian. As a result, we know that Kierkegaard was a Christian author from the beginning and was not addressing himself to a purely secular philosophical community for philosophical purposes. Kierkegaard's purpose was clear; he was attempting to make true Christians out of Christendom. He believed that many of the Christians of his time, largely because of the influence of Hegelianism, had lost the true sense of what it means to be a Christian and a person of faith. Thus, all of his authorship revolved around this theme: what it means to be an existing

who is not a participant in any particular religious tradition but is, in his terminology, 'naturally religious.' The other, faith or revelation strictly speaking, contains *specific* beliefs in the God and revelation present in particular historical religions, churches, creeds, sacred texts, doctrines and so forth. That kind of faith is not attainable by human power, but requires a personal conversion dependent on God's grace. The former, religious faith and revelation in general, is within the scope of philosophy, for it involves natural religious experience that any human beings may have" (See Anderson, *A Commentary on Gabriel Marcel's The Mystery of Being* [Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2006], p.189.) It is absolutely clear from this passage that Marcel not only decides to focus on the "naturally religious," but also believed that special revelation was outside the scope of philosophy, so that his philosophy was assuredly not, strictly speaking, a Christian philosophy. In support of this Anderson quotes Marcel's comment at the end of *The Mystery of Being* (Vol. II) where he states that everything he has said "does not reach as far as revelation, properly so called, and dogma" (*The Mystery of Being* [Vol. II], trans. R Hauge (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2001, pp.187-88).

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980). From now on, this work will be abbreviated as *WOL*.

⁸ Of course, some might disagree given that some take Kierkegaard to treat his own name as if it were a pseudonym. I do not take such a view. Though Kierkegaard always wants to maintain a certain distance from the reader, it appears to me that his views in his signed works have enough parallels in many of his journals, which makes one suspect that his signed texts are in fact his views.

⁹ I am not, of course, defending such an easy distinction between his signed works and his pseudonymous works. The distinction is only mentioned as something that could be argued. What I am arguing, however, is that in *WOL* there is a shift that seems to clarify many of the misconceptions of Kierkegaard that were ascribed to him because of his unsigned works.

human being in the world and to have faith, and especially, Christian faith. Even in his earliest work, *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard expressed that his goal was to seduce people into the religious. What is important to keep in mind here, with respect to his intended goal, is that it was in large part a reaction to the influence of Hegel on the people of his time, for he saw Hegelianism as damaging to the Christian faith in its view of the individual, reason, and God (all of which are addressed below).

The point to be noted and emphasized here is that the seeming differences between these two philosophers appear to emerge as a consequence of the historical backdrop within which they are writing. While Kierkegaard is clearly writing in a post-Hegelian context, and sees himself as responding to Hegel, Marcel, on the other hand, is writing in a context where idealism has already been heavily criticized and attacked by both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and others, and is rather responding to an audience already largely committed to an unbridled individualism, and a critical stance towards reason and rationality. Thus, while Kierkegaard feels the urgent need to respond to Hegel regarding his view of the individual as relegated to the system and as a secondary figure, for example, Marcel does not have an immediate concern with developing the individual aspects of human subjectivity and with emphasizing the priority of the individual over and against Hegel's philosophical system. It could safely be assumed that Marcel, living close to a hundred years after Kierkegaard, has generally seen the collapse of the Hegelian edifice as well as the gradual demise of German Idealism, including his own shattered attempts at an Idealistic system. So what becomes apparent is that both of these thinkers were writing in radically different cultural and historical contexts, which clearly influences their goals and intentions, especially given the fact that they have substantially different audiences in mind. Indeed, the overall impression one might come away with is that while Kierkegaard was responding to a Hegelian system that does away with the individual, and to an absolute rationalism, Marcel was responding to a fervent individualism, relativism, and irrationalism rapidly growing in the face of a Nietzschean worldview and a growing post-modern world. It is undeniable, then, that both these men philosophized in radically different worlds, which clearly influenced their goals as thinkers, and the emphases in their philosophies. Further, it might even be safe to say that what explains their respective emphases is that while Kierkegaard attempted to be the corrective of one extreme, Marcel attempted to be the corrective of the other, opposite (historical-philosophical) extreme—hence their apparent differences.

Finally, as can be seen, if the above textual issues are kept in mind, and the historical context of these thinkers is considered, we have laid the groundwork for an understanding of their differences as being less substantial, and perhaps, instead, circumstantial. Indeed, another important historical factor to be emphasized here, which has already been spoken of from the Kierkegaardian perspective, is that Marcel's initial philosophical interest was never directly Christian. That is, while Kierkegaard was strictly focused upon Christianity from the start, Marcel was not. Only later, at the age of 40, did Marcel's philosophy lead him toward Catholicism, and even then, the nature of his philosophy did not significantly change, and he often noted that his views were not strictly Christian, though they lend themselves to Christian themes. His concern was most often with a kind of existential phenomenology of the nature of faith, and a general religious faith at that, which was not necessarily tied to any specific religion. What has been shown, then, is that while Kierkegaard was expressly attempting to convert Christians into genuine Christians, Marcel was addressing himself to a more general philosophical public/community, and was focused upon responding to an increasingly post-modern world with its Nietzschean tendency toward individualism, relativism, irrationalism, and

even atheism. As such, given that Marcel initially did not have any specifically Christian incentive or affiliation, it could be said that this accounts for much of the perceived differences between them.¹⁰ It is my view, then, that differences between Kierkegaard and Marcel, as outlined above, can be reconciled if the above distinctions and observations are kept in mind. Hence, as we move forward, the observations made here will be a common thread throughout that will help us explain why they may appear to contradict one another, when, in fact, they do not. Each section will carefully explore their texts, and end with a brief reflection on the philosophical relevance of the historical context in relation to the specific theme being discussed.

Individual vs. Community

One of Anderson's central objections to the view that Kierkegaard and Marcel's ideas are compatible is that Marcel's approach seems to be based purely upon inter-subjectivity and community, while Kierkegaard's seems to emphasize the individual and his absolute relation to God. Of Kierkegaard he writes, "He demands that the *single* individual fully recognize and accept his misery and wretchedness; this alone will lead him to a proper God relation,"¹¹ while of Marcel he says that he "stresses positive experiences within the social dimension of human existence. For him, inter-subjective relationships...are the proper route to God."¹² Indeed, Anderson seems to suggest that Marcel's approach to God is purely inter-subjective, through community, or our relation to others. He explains that the "fullness of Being," for Marcel, "which is the goal of man's ontological exigency [i.e., his need for Being] is described...as involving eternal, unbroken communion with others. If this is so, and if God is this fullness of Being, then to experience Him in fidelity and hope is in some way to encounter this realm of perfect inter-subjectivity."¹³ Of Kierkegaard, on the other hand, he states, "that man must reject his spontaneous natural self and this world, and that "He must hate both, die to both."¹⁴ His view of Kierkegaard, then, is that man must seek God not in community—which is part of the world—but alone in his inwardness; it is only in this way that man can approach God and establish his absolute relation to God. Clearly, under Anderson's view then, their approaches to God are irreconcilable.

Of course, it must be admitted that Anderson is correct in that Kierkegaard does appear to suggest, at times, that our approach to God is prior to our relation to others.¹⁵ Even in *WOL*, which I take to be one of his clearest accounts of his view of our relation to others, Kierkegaard states:

¹⁰ Another plausible factor one might consider is the personal/psychological factor: While Marcel grew up alone (a single child) and in a non-religious environment, Kierkegaard was one of seven (the youngest) brothers and lived under a strict religious household. Though I will not attempt an in-depth analysis of what psychological significance or influence these backgrounds would have on their lives and subsequent philosophy, it is far from inappropriate to consider this as a possible element in the respective tenor of their philosophies. It is at least an interesting fact to take notice of in considering their divergences.

¹¹ Thomas Anderson, "The Experiential Paths to God in Kierkegaard and Marcel," p.36 (emphasis added).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.34

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.37.

¹⁵ I take this priority, however, to be, in reality, an ontological priority and not a temporal priority.

Love is a passion of the emotions, but in this emotion a person, even before he relates to the object of love, should first relate to God and thereby learn the requirement, that love is the fulfilling of the Law. Love is a relationship to another person or to other persons, but it is by no means and may by no means be a marital, a friendly, a merely human agreement, a coterie of people, be it ever so loyal and tender! Each one individually, before he relates in love to the beloved, the friend, the loved ones, the contemporaries, must first relate to God and to God's requirement.¹⁶

However, although Kierkegaard emphasized the individual and his relation to God as primary and seems to by-pass *the other*, this is only in appearance. If we read in context and consider other passages, his true meaning becomes clearer. If one thoroughly considers some of his own texts, including *WOL*, one can see past the illusion of a purely individualistic Kierkegaard and recognize his communitarian spirit, a spirit that is comparable to that of Marcel's. Consider the following passage from one of Kierkegaard's journals:

Despite everything people ought to have learned about my maieutic carefulness, in addition to proceeding slowly and continually letting it seem as if I knew nothing more, not the next thing—now on the occasion of my new up-building discourses they will probably bawl out that I do not know what comes next, that I know nothing about sociality... Now I have the theme of the next book. It will be called *Works of Love*.¹⁷

Here we clearly see that Kierkegaard never intended to merely focus on the individual to the exclusion of the other, but that his reason for doing so was due to his initial purpose; to guide people, especially intellectuals, back into the religious sphere, and specifically, to Christianity. After having done that in his pseudonymous works, he was now in the proper position to explore and explain his notion of a Christian community, or of our relation to others.

Let us look at passages that clarify his view of the other, or the neighbor, in *WOL*. He states:

...Christianity has begun from the foundation and therefore with the Spirit's doctrine of what love is. In order to determine what love is, it begins either with God or with the neighbor, a doctrine about love that is the essentially Christian doctrine, since one, in order in love to find the neighbor, must start from God and must find God in love to the neighbor.¹⁸

It is evident in this passage that our love for God does not exclude the neighbor, but instead that they are mutually inclusive. That is, one cannot have one without the other and hence, one can indeed love God by loving one's neighbor, which is far from ignoring the neighbor, as some believe Kierkegaard often does. In the following passage, we also see Kierkegaard suggesting

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p.112.

¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard Journals and Papers*, 5: 597, pp.363-364.

¹⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p.140.

that one is, in fact, deluding oneself if one thinks that one can relate to God without relating to the neighbor or the other:

Such a thing can occur only either to a hypocrite and a deceiver, in order to find an escape, or to someone who misrepresents God, as if God were envious [*misundelig*] of himself and of being loved, instead of the blessed God's being merciful [*miskundelig*] and therefore continually pointing away from himself, so to speak, and saying, 'If you want to love me, then love the people you see; what you do for them, you do for me.' God is too exalted to be able to receive a person's love directly.¹⁹

Hence, it cannot be claimed after reading this passage that Kierkegaard was purely concerned with our relation to God, pure and simple, since he suggested that to love God, we must indeed start by loving the neighbor, which seems to be the opposite of what was initially suggested. If this passage alone is not enough to grasp Kierkegaard's meaning, it should be kept in mind that he expressed this thought in the context of quoting, and being in accord with, the following Biblical text. "How can he who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). In such a context, it is clear that Kierkegaard was suggesting that one must love the neighbor whom he sees in order to be able to love God, which is surely the opposite of our typical understanding of Kierkegaard as advocating a solitary relation to God. It is evident from what has been said that this is not the case and that his apparent emphasis on the individual's relation to God must have a distinct purpose other than to exclude the importance and necessity of our relation to others, since he clearly suggested that our relation to God does not and should not exclude the other, but include it, for he even states, "In the Christian sense, to love people is to love God, and to love God is to love people."²⁰ Indeed, it cannot be clearer that, for Kierkegaard, our relation to God and to others cannot be separated. As a result, it begins to become evident that he is not as far apart from Marcel as many may believe him to be.

In Marcel, moreover, we have a similar confusion, but from the opposite end. Marcel, it is thought, contrary to Kierkegaard, seemed to focus purely on the community and our relation to others in our approach to God. One surely can get the impression that he left no room for the kind of solitary and intimate relation to God that is found in Kierkegaard. Consider the following quotations:

It is not enough to say that it is a metaphysic of being; It is a metaphysic of *we are* as opposed to a metaphysic of *I think*.²¹

I concern myself with being only in so far as I have a more or less distinct consciousness of the underlying unity which ties me to other beings of whose reality I already have a preliminary notion.²²

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.160.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.384.

²¹ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (Vol. II), p.9.

²² *Ibid.*, p.17.

...from the moment when we open ourselves to these infiltrations of the invisible, we cease to be the unskilled and yet pretentious soloist we perhaps were at the start, and gradually become members, wide-eyed and brotherly, of an orchestra in which those whom we so inaptly call the dead are quite certainly much closer to Him of whom we should not perhaps say that He conducts the symphony, but that He *is* the symphony in its profound and intelligible unity.²³

In the first remark, we are reminded of Marcel's adamant rejection of a Cartesian metaphysic and the isolated *cogito* in favor of what he called "a metaphysic of *we are*." The second quote more specifically seems to state that we cannot know Being unless we are first aware, at least to some degree, of our connection or unity with others; this is significant since he equated God with Being, hence the statement seems to apply to knowing God as well. Moreover, this second quote refers to what Marcel termed our inter-subjective nexus or union; this union or our awareness of it is the precondition for our consciousness of Being or God. In the third passage, this seems to be stated more explicitly, so much so that it appears as if we are part of a symphony and that which unifies, the inter-subjective nexus, is equated with God.

Thus, from the above, it can surely appear as if our means of approaching God seem to be through our inter-subjective relations with others and perhaps to the exclusion of some solitary or private relation to God. However, if these passages, in conjunction with others, are read carefully, we can see that none of what Marcel suggests is to the exclusion of God and His necessary role in our lives and in our being. There are some ways in which the above can be resolved, and the first thing we can start with is by pointing out that Marcel does not, in fact, simply equate the inter-subjective nexus with God. He states,

Can we admit that we have reached a point where we may identify Being with inter-subjectivity? Can we say Being *is* intersubjectivity? I must answer immediately that it seems to me impossible to agree to this proposition if it is taken literally. The true answer, it seems to me, is something much more subtle....²⁴

If he does not identify the inter-subjective nexus with God, as we see him deny in this passage, then Marcel is not in danger of being a kind of pantheist who leaves no room for a transcendent God we can relate to personally. In fact, he did leave room for such an awareness of God that did not directly include others. In the following passage, we see Marcel express himself in a way that could, perhaps, be confused with Kierkegaard. He writes,

Perhaps my soul would be the ego of the psychologist, which is really only a him, were I not to converse about it with God, were I not involved and vitally interested in this conversation...If I am asked why my soul can only become itself when in relation to God, and when confronted with God, I cannot at present see any means of formulating an abstract answer which will satisfy

²³ *Ibid.*, p.187.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.16.

me. But I can at least say this (though it needs elucidating and sifting): My soul is always a thou for God.²⁵

Not only is Marcel's expression akin to that of Kierkegaard in that he (Marcel) spoke as if he could and did talk to God directly²⁶ but he also emphasized a central Kierkegaardian theme, that we can only truly become ourselves before God. Thus, while we see in the previous passage that Marcel did not merely equate our unity with others with God, we also see that we can relate to God directly, and further, that such a relation is fundamental to becoming ourselves. If this is the case, this alone brings him quite close to Kierkegaard, for he would only be incompatible with Kierkegaard if he were to deny that we can relate to God directly and only through others, but from what has been shown, this appears to be false.

Furthermore, although Marcel emphasized the community in our approach to God, he explained that in genuine community, or in our fidelity to others, one needs God as the foundation. In other words, he suggests that the condition for the possibility of unconditional fidelity is an awareness of an absolute Thou, as he called it, whether implicit or explicit. Consider the following quote from Anderson:

A particular individual may simply not think about what is ultimately involved in his or her unlimited faithfulness to a spouse or child or close friend or cause. In fact, such an individual could even verbally profess atheism, Marcel says. Nevertheless, only an assurance grounded in an encounter, however faint, with an absolute Thou can furnish the underpinnings of a person's unconditional commitment to another creature.²⁷

In Marcel's own words, "Unconditionality is a true sign of God's presence."²⁸ As a result, it is undeniable that God is necessary for our unconditional relations to others. Hence, we see that even for Marcel, God is the necessary third in our relations to others, so that God is never left out in all of our relationships. This is a similar concept to the one found in Kierkegaard where he expressed the view that God is the third in any love relationship. In fact, it could be argued that this is the cause of Kierkegaard's emphasis on God, that is, that He is the ontological precondition of our love relation to others, and this is essentially Marcel's claim as well. Thus, the priority expressed in Kierkegaard of our relation to God could be seen as either performing a function of communicating something in the context of his text, or as emphasizing God's ontological priority in relationships.

In view of all that has just been textually shown, then, the original position appears much less certain, and perhaps involves a misunderstanding of the thought of both thinkers. And it appears more urgent to review the question as to how, or why, they have appeared to us so often as operating from opposed philosophical perspectives. For this, it will be useful to revisit their respective historical contexts (mentioned above) in an attempt to explain their apparent

²⁵ Gabriel Marcel, *Metaphysical Journal*, trans. Bernard Wall (Chicago: Regnery, 1952), p.200.

²⁶ It should be noted that Marcel often speaks of God as a thou, and when doing so he is not referring to any specific sort of religious conception of God, such as the Christian conception, but to a more generic notion rather than any specific dogma.

²⁷ Thomas Anderson, *A Commentary on Gabriel Marcel's The Mystery of Being*, p.134.

²⁸ Gabriel Marcel, "Theism and Personal Relationships," *Cross Currents*, I (1950-51), p.40.

differences. It is well known that in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he compares Hegel to a man who builds an immense castle but lives in a little shed next to it. While Hegel's philosophical system is magnificent, little room has been given in it for human subjectivity—indeed, subjectivity is given a mere shed in which to dwell. Hegelian philosophy, for Kierkegaard, devalues the individual to such an extent that it makes the individual insignificant. But in so doing it is hurting the Christian faith, which is based upon an individual's relation to God. That is, from Kierkegaard's perspective, Hegelianism, in its negation of the human subject, is preventing the very possibility of a proper God relation, inasmuch as the prerequisite of a genuine relation to God is the individual. Kierkegaard's historical situation, then, shows that the reason for his pre-occupation with the individual was that of defending the Christian faith against the temptation to be watered down, so to speak, by the influence of a Hegelian philosophy that undermines the central prerequisite for a proper Christian faith, the individual.

Marcel, on the other hand, finds himself addressing, by and large, a post-Nietzschean audience already well versed in individualism. Faced with such exaggerated individualism, Marcel will feel the obligation, contrary to Kierkegaard, to emphasize community and the need to relate to others in order to reach God. This historical context, it seems, moves Marcel in the opposite direction, in terms of emphasis, as a corrective to the predispositions of his contemporaries. For instance, it is a familiar fact that with the advent of existentialism, Marcel, a central figure in the movement, often found himself having to respond to Sartre's existentialism, from which he tried to separate himself. And, not surprisingly, we see that it is often on his view of the individual and of one's relation to others that Marcel criticizes Sartre. It is known that Sartre, likely influenced by Nietzsche, and others, emphasizes the individual and his freedom as a highest value, often depicting other people as mere detractors from our freedom. Marcel felt the need to correct such a view; his perspective of our relation to others is much more positive than that of Sartre's. Indeed, in his view, others become central to our own fulfillment; our need for Being—our ontological exigence—is intimately tied to our relation to others. In other words, the Sartrean perspective, for Marcel, insulates the self, alienates us from ourselves as well as from others, and thus, ultimately deprives the self of a proper access or relation to Being. For Marcel, our access to Being cannot be achieved by means of abstraction, but only through concrete relations to individual beings, i.e., others, and the Sartrean approach would bar us from this. After all is said and done, then, it appears quite evident that both Kierkegaard and Marcel's historical context inclines them both toward a certain focus, or emphasis, given that they have a certain kind of audience in mind. And it might be the case that their respective emphases obscures for us the fact that their views are not as far apart as often believed.

Faith vs. Rationality

That Marcel did not want to forsake reason and understanding when speaking of our encounter with God, or coming “to know God,” while Kierkegaard advocated believing against the understanding,²⁹ is a view that Anderson also espouses. Speaking of Kierkegaard's view of Christianity he states, “All of these truths must be revealed by God for they are not within the scope of human understanding...that is why for Kierkegaard Christian faith is a sheer act of the

²⁹ Perhaps reason and understanding, however, played slightly different roles in each (or have somewhat distinct meanings), yet Anderson does not seem to allow for this possibility.

will.”³⁰ Hence, faith is an act of the will, not the understanding. Elaborating upon this, he explains, “With God’s help it is possible for man to will to ‘leap’ beyond this world, beyond confidence in himself, including his own *understanding*, and believe in the absurd, the God-man.”³¹ Contrary to this view of Kierkegaard advocating the utter opposition of human understanding to the realm of the religious, Anderson appears to depict Marcel’s view as the opposite extreme. He suggests that for Marcel “though the presence of God in human experience is a divine gift, man can become aware of it himself through his own powers of reflection.”³² As such, then, Anderson holds that, for Marcel, through our own understanding, or “powers of reflection,” we can become aware of God, i.e., that we can come to know God’s presence. This perspective, however, which views Marcel’s approach as completely compatible with reason, or human understanding, while Kierkegaard’s approach is not, seems somewhat flawed.

The notion that Kierkegaard clearly rejected reason in his approach to God while Marcel did not, though likely to be false, is also quite common. Consider the following passage from Brendan Sweetman, according to whom Marcel has a quite unique approach to the question of the existence of God:

It is an existentialist approach...yet it is not simply based on a faith commitment to God, as we find...in Kierkegaard, whose view emphasizes the affective and volitional nature of our relationship with God at the expense, many would argue, of any rational approach.³³

Here, though Sweetman comes close to asserting that Kierkegaard’s approach is anti-rational, he modestly, and correctly, states that “some would argue” this—perhaps because of Kierkegaard’s emphasis upon the will in the God-relation. This is simply to illustrate that this is, indeed, a common interpretation of Kierkegaard. However, in responding to this common misunderstanding, it is important to keep in mind Kierkegaard’s and Marcel’s intended goals, and then to be clear as to how they intend to go about achieving them. When this is clarified, they do not seem as far apart as usually imagined. The reason their intended goals is significant was mentioned earlier; it was suggested that because Kierkegaard had a specifically Christian audience in mind, and a specifically Christian goal, and was writing in the wake of Hegelian philosophy, this would account for some apparent differences between the two. Hence, concerning this particular issue of reason vs. faith, Kierkegaard would obviously appear to differ from Marcel because he was, strictly speaking, interested in Christian faith and responding to Hegel. It is in this context that Kierkegaard especially seemed to recommend believing against the understanding.

Aside from this more general point, however, we can also see that if we understand Kierkegaard correctly, and in more detail, we see that it is implied in his approach that reflection, and even reason, can help lead us to the religious—though of course Kierkegaard also claimed that (unaided) reason seeks or leads to its own destruction in relation to God/faith. It is clear that he did not completely do away with reason; it has its place. At the very least, it is implicit in

³⁰ Thomas Anderson, “The Experiential Paths to God in Kierkegaard and Marcel,” p.28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.29 (emphasis added).

³² *Ibid.*, p.37.

³³ Brendan Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel: Epistemology, Human Person, the Transcendent* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi Press, 2008), p.69.

Kierkegaard that reflection is a necessary tool, or can be, in bringing one to God. This is especially the case when we remember that in using pseudonyms, Kierkegaard showed that he believed in the possibility of seducing people into the religious, into the truth, and such a seduction cannot take place outside of reflection; hence, it is implied that in coming to God, reflection and understanding can play a role, even if it is to be removed so that there can be a true existential movement. Truly, for Kierkegaard, reason can have its role, even if it is just to show reason its own limits and force the individual to come face to face with his concrete reality, and in the end, his need for God. However, if Kierkegaard's intent is seen in this light, he was in accord with Marcel, for Marcel also sought to show the limits of reason, i.e., of a certain kind of reason, or reflection. Thus, if there is a difference, it seems likely that it is a matter of emphasis, or even terminology, rather than an essential difference. This common ground of showing the limits of reason can be more clearly seen when we take into account Kierkegaard's view of indirect communication, which may be connected to the notion of secondary reflection in Marcel.

In *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard explained the need for his indirect method and its nature in the following way:

Whereas the objective thinker can perfectly well communicate directly the result of his own reflection, "the subjective existing thinker" discovers an impediment to communication in the further reflection that the truth he arrives at "interests" his existence (is part and parcel of it) and as such cannot simply be handed over to another, but to be appropriated, to become one's own, it must be acquired through the same process of reflection by which it was originally reached. Hence the communication must be indirect, artfully devised to prompt the other to think out the thing for himself, while the subjectivity of the communicator remains concealed.³⁴

Anyone familiar with Marcel should be struck by the poignant similarity of what Kierkegaard expresses here to Marcel's philosophical approach, especially to what he called secondary reflection. The lynchpin of my argument here is that they both seem to be trying to bring us back into contact with a concrete reality that is not achieved through mere abstract thought³⁵ or unaided/detached reflection (that is divorced from existence), which is in large part the core of Kierkegaard's revolt against reason. If we properly understand his actual critique of reason, this misunderstanding would not have taken place. In other words, it is the totalizing reason that equates itself with reality and all truth, as in Hegel, that he rejected.³⁶

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.117.

³⁵ What I am here calling abstract thought is often called pure thought by Kierkegaard, which is a thought that is indifferent and detached from existence. I use this expression—abstract thought—because it is the Marcelian expression, which I find to be most accurate. I will use the phrase "abstract thought" as equivalent to "pure thought" in the rest of this article.

³⁶ As one commentator puts it, "Protesting against the vicious abstraction of reason from existence in Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Feuerbach staged a timely return to the realities of lived experience." Calvin O. Schrag, *Existence and Human Freedom: Towards an Ontology of Human Finitude* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1961), p.xii.

With respect to the interpretation, noted earlier, that regards Kierkegaard as voluntaristic, let us look at the following revealing passage from Calvin Schrag:

Existentialism is thus neither intellectualistic nor voluntaristic, neither rationalistic nor irrationalistic. It transcends the distinctions. The validity of thought is in nowise denied. What is denied is that thought can be reduced to a rational, objectifying, theoretical activity...(Kierkegaard) speaks most positively of thought, as long as it is rooted in existence.³⁷

Here, it cannot be more clearly illustrated that the reason Kierkegaard (as well as Marcel, at times) has been thought to be an irrationalist and a voluntarist is not because there is truth in these claims, but because he has tried to tread the fine line between objective truth and the purely subjective. Clearly, Kierkegaard did not disdain thought in general, but a particular kind of thinking that attempts to capture all of reality through abstract thought and logical thinking. Thought, however, that is intimately tied to existence, as explained in the above passage, he welcomed, and even encouraged. In this sense, he was, again, in harmony with Marcel, for Marcel claimed that his method is that of beginning in the concrete, moving to the abstract, and back to the concrete. As he stated it, "My method of advance does invariably consist, as the reader will have noticed already, in working my way up from life to thought and then down from thought to life again, so that I may try to throw more light upon life."³⁸ As the following passage from Schrag (discussing Kierkegaard) illustrates, we can see that Kierkegaard and Marcel seem to have strikingly similar notions in mind:

It is precisely the task of the existential thinker to *think* his existence. He must penetrate his concrete particularity and existential involvement with thought which has universal validity. The existential thinker is a thinker and an existing individual at one and the same time. He lives his existence at the same time that he thinks it...Kierkegaard's far reaching reservations about Hegel arise, not because Hegel was a thinker, but because he identified thought with the rational and the logical. We must distinguish, cautions Kierkegaard, between 'pure thought' and 'abstract thought.' Abstract thought is that which reflectively examines and describes existence by preserving a relationship with it.³⁹

In this rich passage, we see that, much like Marcel, thought and understanding have their very significant role to play in the life of a human being; indeed, one gets the impression that thought is indispensable for Kierkegaard. It is only that we are supposed to be specific kind of thinkers, bringing thinking to bear on aspects of our existence, as opposed to disdaining all thought in general. As nicely explained in this quote, it is only thought as identified merely with the rational

³⁷ Calvin O. Schrag, *Existence and Human Freedom: Towards an Ontology of Human Finitude*, p.5.

³⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, p.28.

³⁹ Calvin O. Schrag, *Existence and Human Freedom: Towards an Ontology of Human Finitude*, p.5-6. It seems clear here that *thought*, as used by Kierkegaard, has a similar meaning to Marcel's use of the word *reflection*, which is also not merely reduced to the rational, but can penetrate into reality in its existential concreteness. Hence, I will use *thought* and *reflection* as synonymous terms throughout.

and the logical that Marcel himself had problems with. Yet, if this is the case, it becomes clear that Marcel did not disagree with Kierkegaard.

Thus, let us look at Marcel in more detail with respect to this issue. In one place Marcel expresses the following point:

Person—engagement—community—reality: there we have a sort of chain of notions which, to be exact, do not readily follow from each other by deduction (actually there is nothing more fallacious than a belief in the value of deduction) but of which the union can be grasped by an act of the mind.⁴⁰

What can be immediately gleaned from this passage is: 1) that Marcel seems to be rejecting the kind of reason, as mentioned above, that Kierkegaard rejected, which proceeds through pure deduction, i.e., logic; and 2) that although the unity of these notions is not arrived at through reason (logic), the mind can perceive their unity to be real. This second point is significant, since it shows how Marcel, as well as Kierkegaard, was attempting to speak of a reality, or truth, which cannot be spoken of objectively, since it is outside the reach of pure reason alone. At this point, Marcel and Kierkegaard seem in total harmony. Consider another passage from Marcel:

We are here at the most difficult point of our whole discussion. Rather than to speak of intuition in this context, we should say that we are dealing with an assurance which underlies the entire development of thought, even of discursive thought; it can therefore be approached only by a second reflection—a reflection whereby I ask myself how and from what starting point I was able to proceed in my initial reflection, which itself postulated the ontological, but without knowing it. This second reflection is recollection in the measure in which recollection can be self-conscious.⁴¹

From these statements, we see that Marcel was also launching a critique of reason of his own, or of a particular kind of reason; and this critique is clearly analogous to that of Kierkegaard's. It might even be the case that Kierkegaard would not object to Marcel's kind of reflection and understanding if he had been exposed to it. It is a particular kind of arrogant reflection, objective/scientific, and totalizing reason, which both of them rejected. Furthermore, though it might be said that Marcel made more use of reflection than Kierkegaard in coming to religious consciousness, it is also the case that, while allowing for an awareness of transcendence through reflection, Marcel was also adamant that such contact with God (transcendence) is one that is beyond all conceptual grasp and description, and hence beyond our understanding—at least in some sense. In fact, his notion of Being, which he equates with God,⁴² is that which resists and overflows all conceptualizations that we attempt to ascribe to it. Hence, much like Kierkegaard, Marcel is suggesting that our usual categories or concepts fail us in attempting to apprehend the absolute Thou, or God. This is in part the source of his need to articulate the notion of a different kind of reflection, one he calls secondary reflection, which is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's

⁴⁰ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, p.16.

⁴¹ Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existence* (New York: Citadel Press: 1984), p.25.

⁴² It is well known that Marcel essentially equated his notion of God with Being, unlike Heidegger, who shied away from making such a leap—explicitly at least.

indirect approach. Marcel speaks of an aspect of reality he calls the realm of mystery in which we find such specific mysteries as the realities of love, hope, fidelity, God, and so on. And what characterizes this realm is that it is a space in which the subject and object dichotomy necessary for objective thought breaks down, and the need for a reflection that illuminates concrete reality becomes necessary. Mystery is that from which we cannot separate our being: that from which we cannot abstract in order to objectify. As such, it can only be accessed by a reflection that illuminates the essential unity of the initial experience, or concrete existential reality, which is the role of secondary reflection. Secondary reflection then, as that which allows us to access mystery, is the kind of reflection that keeps us most intimately tied to our existence, as Kierkegaard would also have us do. In short, just as Kierkegaard would not have us do away with thinking as long as it is intimately tied to our existence, so Marcel elaborates on a notion of reflection whose nature is precisely to remain tied to our concrete existence in the world in order to illuminate it. Evidently, therefore, they appear to approach one another from opposite ends, and come into contact; and to be clear, they come into contact by desiring their audience to have an encounter with their own existential reality, and not through a thought that disconnects them from their lived experience. It is not surprising then that in explaining the intimate connection between his plays and his philosophy,⁴³ Marcel would speculate in his book, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, that perhaps he achieved something that Kierkegaard himself was attempting, i.e., revealing through artistic means concrete realities that could not be grasped by pure thought alone.

At this point, what we have seen in this section is that with respect to the issue of faith and reason, the historical context is a central component. We can see that unlike Marcel, Kierkegaard feels the need, given his context, to address the exaggerated rationalism of Hegelian idealism, even to the point of apparently emphasizing the irrationality of faith,⁴⁴ as in some of his pseudonyms, such as *Fear and Trembling*. As a rationalist, Hegel wants to explain everything through reason. According to Kierkegaard, however, such a stance is detrimental to true faith, which cannot be rationalized. In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard emphasizes the limits of objective thinking in trying to approach God. All the rational arguments for God will never reach the depths of an experience with God. Indeed, these objective arguments can at best give approximations of truth, but they will never yield faith, which involves a relationship, and is not the conclusion of an argument. Thus, according to Kierkegaard, the God-relation cannot be mediated through thought, as in Hegel. Reality cannot be reduced to a conceptual framework.

⁴³ Marcel explains in many different places that he views his plays as intimately connected to his philosophy. A couple of reasons for why this is so may be quickly mentioned: one is that he believed that since mystery is a realm that can only be accessed through our concrete experience, his plays more clearly revealed to the audience the reality he was attempting to communicate; another reason is that, as he explained, many of his philosophical insights were first and foremost perceived through the writing of his plays.

⁴⁴ Such an emphasis is very likely the reason Marcel himself was not aware of his true kinship with Kierkegaard, for at the time, Kierkegaardian scholarship was still in its infancy given that many of his works were not yet properly translated and rigorous commentaries were scant. Hence, it is probable that Marcel was most familiar only with Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works and accepted the commonly held view that Kierkegaard was an voluntarist and irrationalist. In recent scholarship, it has been often shown that Kierkegaard can no longer be viewed as an irrationalist. Those who have done an excellent job at defending this view include Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal. See for example: Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), and Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette: IN.: Purdue University Press, 1996).

Marcel, however, was dealing with a totally different audience, and had, most probably, quite a different goal in mind. He is writing within the post-Nietzschean context of a distrust of reason and rationality after the collapse of the Hegelian system, and where there is a renewed emphasis on the irrational components of human experience. This, however, cannot exhaust the experience of faith for Marcel inasmuch as it would seem to abolish any objective component of the religious experience. And this is precisely what Marcel wants to avoid inasmuch as, for him, the spiritual experience pertains to a domain of reality, and therefore has some objective reality—in the sense of not being merely subjective; for, though it is a realm that can only be accessed through subjectivity, it is nonetheless real. In this sense, then, it is probable that Marcel was attempting to redeem philosophical reflection, albeit from a firm existential stance. In other words, he could be seen as seeking to rescue philosophy and our spiritual perspective from a purely irrational and relativistic tendency. From this, again, it appears that their goals and emphases might have arisen from their historical context, and that while Kierkegaard may have been fighting against the temptation of his era toward a universalizing reason that does away with faith, Marcel may have been attempting to ameliorate the temptation toward a relativism and irrationalism latent in a post-modern worldview, which may also be detrimental to faith, or to the spiritual life of man.

Immanence and Transcendence

As already mentioned, for Anderson, Kierkegaard's God appears to be much more transcendent than that of Marcel's. He argues for the view that there is an absolute gulf between God and man in Kierkegaard, such that this separation—through man's sin—is capable of being restored only by God, and not by man:

God's kingdom and the world's cannot be mixed; they are 'heterogeneous,' 'discontinuous,' and it is 'blasphemy' to think otherwise. If man is to achieve a personal relation with the true God, he must be willing with Divine help to annihilate his spontaneous inclinations, deny his understanding, and renounce all finite things.⁴⁵

In contrast to this, Anderson views Marcel's God as quite immanent, and suggests that the separation between God and man is neither so great nor so obvious. He suggests the following:

Behind Marcel's conviction that man can encounter God through creatures and can become aware of this encounter through his own powers is...his belief that there is continuity between the human realm and the Divine. Being, he says...is not strictly speaking in a totally other world but is within this one as its most profound dimension.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Thomas Anderson, "The Experiential Paths to God in Kierkegaard and Marcel," p.37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Marcel, as we know, equates Being with God; indeed, we see here that Anderson portrays Marcel as holding the view that there is a sort of continuity between God and man, and of God as the ground of being.

In our exploration of this apparent gulf between Kierkegaard and Marcel in the above, let us begin with an examination of Marcel's view of God, and whether it is purely immanent in a way that is incompatible with Kierkegaard's God. Let us recall an earlier passage already quoted where Marcel stated,

...from the moment we open ourselves to these infiltrations of the invisible, we cease to be the unskilled and yet pretentious soloist we perhaps were at the start, and gradually become members, wide-eyed and brotherly, of an orchestra in which those whom we so inaptly call the dead are quite certainly much closer to Him of whom we should not perhaps say that He conducts the symphony, but that He *is* the symphony in its profound and intelligible unity.⁴⁷

Surely it appears here that Marcel took God to be quite close to man so that one could hardly distinguish between them, and one might even go as far as to think that he is proposing a kind of pantheism. However, more to the point, if this was his view of God, that we intimately participate in God's reality, then surely we cannot be far from being able to reach God through our own powers, or so it seems. Hence, he appeared to be veering away from Kierkegaard on this point. Yet, let us explore further if this is in fact the case: that they were at odds with each other at this juncture.

Aside from the possible misunderstanding that could arise from the above, Marcel actually denied that he was a pantheist, and more specifically, that the inter-subjective nexus between people and God could be equated. And surely, there is plenty of evidence that God is not as immanent for Marcel as it might first appear, which in turn brings him closer to Kierkegaard than typically recognized. Consider the following quote:

The more we take notice of the specific character which the affirmation of God presents—above all the fact that it aims at a transcendental reality—the more we have to realize that no fact of any kind, no objective structure, can be placed on a level with this reality and exclude it.⁴⁸

It is clear from this that Marcel was expressing the point that God is utterly beyond any objective structure in the world, and in this way, completely transcends it. Interestingly, Clyde Pax also understands Marcel's notion of God to be close to Kierkegaard's in its transcendent element, as is evident in the following passage:

Unlike both the atheist and the traditional theologian or philosopher who would demonstrate the existence of God, the man of faith looks not to an ultimate and necessary metaphysical that, but to an absolute Thou who can

⁴⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (Vol. II), p.187.

⁴⁸ Gabriel Marcel, "Contemporary Atheism and the Religious Mind," *Philosophy Today* 4 (Winter 1960), p.254.

only be approached by invocation and testimony. In this sense Kierkegaard rightly saw our approach to God as a leap into the abyss of faith.⁴⁹

Here it seems that Marcel, as depicted by Pax, quite explicitly agrees with Kierkegaard that God cannot be approached through logical demonstrations or arguments, in short, by our natural powers of reason, but by relating to Him as a subject or an absolute Thou; yet, more importantly, Pax seems to suggest that for Marcel, God is, in fact, transcendent from the world such that we can approach him *only* through “invocation and testimony,” as he put it. As a result, Pax understands Marcel as admitting that we are left only with the leap into ‘the abyss of faith’ that Kierkegaard spoke of. It appears, then, that Marcel was in agreement with Kierkegaard in both the fact that God is transcendent, and that this transcendence makes him inaccessible to us through our natural powers. Anderson also states that they both believed that we must ultimately rely on grace to truly come to God. This is especially the case for Marcel when we are speaking of the specifically Christian; in this realm, he spoke only of the conversion experience as being appropriate. That is, only through a personal conversion experience does a man truly become a Christian and such a conversion is clearly thought to be outside the power of the natural man. Thus again, when we remain clear as to when we are speaking of the specifically Christian or not, it becomes clearer that Kierkegaard and Marcel’s supposed opposition is not so obvious.

We have, now, only to see if Kierkegaard’s view of God’s radical transcendence can be brought down to a level compatible with that of Marcel’s understanding, since we have already seen that Marcel’s notion of God can be brought closer to that of Kierkegaard’s. The first thing to note is that we need to be as specific as possible as to what Kierkegaard’s view of transcendence actually was. Well, here, again, if we remember that Kierkegaard was, by and large, concerned with Christianity, we can more accurately understand his notion of transcendence, and how, at this level, he was fundamentally in agreement with Marcel; in other words, when Kierkegaard was speaking ontologically about the nature of God or reality, as he often seemed to be doing in *WOL*, we see that God seems to be quite immanent and is even described as being “within a person’s innermost being.”⁵⁰ However, when he was speaking specifically about Christianity, and, in this context, remarked about our relationship to God, he spoke of God as being utterly transcendent and far from us; however, this is clearly because he was intent on emphasizing our utter *qualitative* difference from God. By this, he meant that as sinners, we are utterly separate and distant from God. As such, then, his claim was not to be taken as the declaration of God’s utter transcendence at an ontological level—since he spoke of God in terms quite similar to those of Marcel’s in many places—but as one that declares a qualitative distinction between man and God, which we can recognize only by the help of God Himself; of course, after such a divine revelation, we would have come closer to knowing the truest or highest notion of God, as Kierkegaard would have it.

Having said this, it is evident that Kierkegaard’s notion of transcendence was often in the context of what he thought to be true Christianity, but that inasmuch as we are speaking ontologically, Marcel’s notion of God as the ground of being and the absolute Thou are not far from what Kierkegaard appears to suggest. Let us, then, look briefly at some Kierkegaardian passages that illustrate this point further. In explaining the origin or source of Love, Kierkegaard states,

⁴⁹ Clyde Pax, *An Existential Approach to God* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), p.74.

⁵⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, pp.8-9.

There is a place in a person's innermost being; from this place flows the life of love, for 'from the heart flows life.' But you cannot see this place; however deeply you penetrate, the origin eludes you in remoteness and hiddenness....From this place flows love along many paths, but along none of these paths can you force your way into its hidden origin. Just as God dwells in a light from which flows every ray that illuminates the world, yet no one can force his way along these paths in order to see God, since the paths of light turn into darkness when one turns toward the light—so Love dwells in hiding or is hidden in the innermost being.⁵¹

Aside from the image of God as the light of the sun upon which one cannot gaze directly, what is most striking about this passage is that the origin of love is claimed to dwell within man himself. If we recall the fact that Kierkegaard has already equated God with Love itself, then the above amounts to stating that God resides deep within human beings themselves, and not outside. Clearly this is not the typical Kierkegaard that many have come to know, that is, one who views God as utterly transcendent from the world, and man. Of course, Kierkegaard claimed that we cannot glance upon God directly, but neither can we do so according to Marcel; this is precisely why Marcel found it necessary to employ his notion of secondary reflection—an indirect methodology—and why he spoke of a “blinded intuition,” since we cannot gaze upon God directly.

Another such passage that brings Kierkegaard's notion of God much closer to that of Marcel's is the following:

Love's hidden life is in the innermost being, unfathomable, and then in turn is in an unfathomable connectedness with all existence. Just as the quiet lake originates deep down in hidden springs no eye has seen, so also does a person's love originate even more deeply in God's love.⁵²

Here, not only are we told that human love originates in God's love—God being the precondition for our human love—but it is claimed that God, as Love, is unequivocally within the innermost being of all people. He stated even more strongly that this Love, which is God, was in an “unfathomable” connection with all of existence. A clearer ontological claim could not be made; it is obvious that Kierkegaard saw God as the ontological foundation, not only of our love, but also of all existence. Hence, much like in Marcel, God here is characterized as the ground of Being. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard could confidently assert, “Ah, but if you bear in mind that from the point of view of Christianity and truth God is always present in everything, that it is solely around him that everything revolves.”⁵³

We have seen, then, that though Kierkegaard's God may seem to be utterly transcendent and incompatible with that of Marcel's God, it turns out that Kierkegaard's God is not as divorced from the world as it first appears, and neither is Marcel's God as immanent as one might suppose. Surely, they are not as distinct on this point as usually thought, and, in fact, they

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.382.

appear to come into contact in many passages, as already shown, especially when their remarks are understood in their proper context and reference.

Now, as to the historical philosophical context, unlike Marcel, Kierkegaard was responding to Hegel's notion of God, which, for many, including Kierkegaard, is a pantheistic God—or at least a God much more immanent than the traditional Christian God. This, however, is detrimental to a genuine Christian spirituality, according to Kierkegaard, inasmuch as God becomes too readily accessible to humans. Indeed, according to Hegel, God can be directly accessed through our own powers, through reason. In its reduction of God to the rational, so to speak, Hegelian philosophy does a disservice to Christianity, since it denatures God by removing the transcendent quality of God as it is understood in Christianity. In fact, it is well known that some scholars have interpreted Hegel as a kind of Pantheist (or a Panatheist), and that he speaks, at times, as if the Absolute Spirit is the spirit of people; this is what allows some commentators, like Alexandre Kojève, to interpret Hegel as an atheist, since he appears to reduce God to “the spirit of the people,” pure and simple.⁵⁴ Indeed, Hegel often speaks as if the Absolute Spirit manifests itself through us, as if there is no separation between the absolute spirit and our spirit in essence, so that there is a kind of oneness. In yet other places he speaks as if the absolute spirit is manifesting itself through history, which thus seems to reduce God to the movements of history, making God accessible to man through his understanding of History. Though some might argue that Hegel's God is not purely immanent, his God is clearly not so transcendent as to be inaccessible or ungraspable by man; there is therefore no need of man to be rescued, or saved, by God; the condition of his salvation is within his own power and reach, and therein lies the rub for Kierkegaard. For Hegel's God makes the Christian faith, characterized by an absolute dependence on God for salvation, essentially, superfluous. That is, more specifically, Hegelianism makes the god man, the God in time, Christ, unnecessary; in other words, since man is already one with God, he has no need of salvation, especially since salvation is now, in a sense, a raising of our consciousness, or knowledge, rather than grace from a transcendent being.

Marcel, however, was responding to a totally different audience that has already experienced the death of God, and for which, it might be said, God has become transcendent to the point of absence; as a result, his need for an emphasis upon the immanence and proximity of God as Being could be understood as a response to this. Or put differently, Marcel, in contrast to Kierkegaard, was aware of speaking to an audience familiar with Nietzsche, aware of the recent demise of Idealism, the failure of rationalism, and with a propensity for atheism. It is not surprising then, that with an often atheistic philosophical audience in mind, Marcel would tailor his philosophical discussions to such a framework/paradigm. It is interesting to note, for instance, that Marcel several times writes entire essays on the notion of proofs for the existence of God, on whether they are successful or achieve their intended purpose, and of how an atheist and a theist are to approach one another, i.e., what would be the proper stance or attitude to take to one another in order to have a profitable conversation—Kierkegaard rarely considered such questions, given that he was speaking to an audience already presuming itself to be religious, and Christian as well. In light of this, it is also not surprising that many, or most, of Marcel's philosophical reflections, even when directly discussing God, often reference familiar concrete experiences that everyone can have, or relate to, such as fidelity, hope, love, and so on. He rarely

⁵⁴ “...few of his readers have understood that in the final analysis dialectic means atheism.” Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. by J.H. Nicholas, Jr., ed. by Allan Bloom (Ithica, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1969), p.259.

speaks of anything like a special revelation from God that only a kind of Christian mystic might relate to. On the contrary, he refers to experiences that the common man can relate to, and phenomenologically explores them, unearthing their philosophical implications. He at times even appears to suggest that Christianity is in a realm of special revelation, in which conversion is the only proper approach to it and perhaps that little can be explored of it philosophically, such as specific religious doctrines and sacraments. It is clear then, that on the whole, Marcel seems interested in a certain philosophical audience that is often inclined toward atheism, and not interested in Christianity, which helps to explain his tendency to emphasize the more immanent aspects of religiousness, rather than the more difficult transcendent realms of religiousness that might be found in Christianity, as demonstrated by Kierkegaard.

Conclusion

The foregoing has been intended to develop an alternative view of the relation between Kierkegaard and Marcel than what is typical. I have suggested throughout the view that although Kierkegaard and Marcel can easily be regarded as holding mutually exclusive philosophies, careful consideration of their work reveals that such a simple distinction is not easily justified. The method of approach has shown that on every major issue about which Kierkegaard and Marcel are often thought to be opposed to each other, there are passages that seem to leave the possibility of including the others' point of view, thus, making them mutually inclusive.

It can be admitted, of course, as Professor Anderson points out, that they seem to emphasize experiential approaches that were distinct; yet a mere emphasis does not necessarily equal the exclusion of other possibilities, or even of seemingly opposite possibilities. In other words, although it is true that Kierkegaard could be seen as emphasizing "negative" human experiences such as guilt, sin, anxiety, despair, and so on in our approach to God while Marcel seemed to focus on positive experiences such as love, fidelity, and hope, it is not the case that Kierkegaard said nothing of such experiences, or did not allow for them to be of aid in bringing us to God, and *vice versa*. What is more, we have seen that on the three major points of possible tension discussed earlier—the individual vs. community, faith vs. rationality, immanence vs. transcendence—the conflicting notion thought to be held by the one was usually contradicted by passages that resembled the other's view, or at least made their disagreement less obvious.

With regard to whatever remaining issues that have not been directly addressed, I suspect that the answer lies in what I have suggested at the beginning of this essay with respect to their focus. That is, I have suggested that the probable explanation for the seeming unresolvable differences between these two thinkers is their different historical and existential context, which in turn gives rise to their distinct goals and philosophical interest. In other words, we have seen that—aside from the possible misreading that may arise because of the subtleties of their respective texts—their supposed differences arose, by and large, out of their respective interest, focus, and individual goals, such as bringing people into a true Christianity for Kierkegaard, and reflecting philosophically about the nature of faith and how we are to have a proper knowledge of Being, or God, for Marcel. It is also because of these diverse interests and purposes birthed from their historical context that differences in terminology also arose, which is what causes much of the confusion. After clarifying some of these terminological difficulties, then, and keeping track of the individual emphases of each, we might better understand the relation between the two philosophies and begin to see not only that they are compatible, but that they are

also complimentary. Though some differences must obviously be admitted, the differences, I have argued, usually lie in emphases rather than on substantial irreconcilable disagreements.⁵⁵ I hope to have shown that the view of mutual exclusivity, though initially persuasive, remains inconclusive. In the end, it seems reasonable to suggest that their philosophical incompatibility should not be taken for granted, and that further reflection is at the very least warranted to support such a claim.

⁵⁵ I argue, instead, that their differences are superficial and, at best, a dispute among members of a family who share a similar worldview.