

**GABRIEL MARCEL’S IDEA OF ‘LONGING FOR TRANSCENDENCE’ AND
RE-HUMANIZATION IN NIGERIA**

*(A quest for a new understanding or re-interpretation of the
concept ‘Being Human’)*

By

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Abstract

The question of ‘Being’ as raised by an ancient philosopher Parmenides has been a perennial problem in philosophy and has continued to dominate philosophical debates till date. For some scholars, the mystery of being is itself a mystery; being is ‘the indefinable’. This fact results to the enigmatic invitation for a proper contextual philosophical reflection into the nature of being. This is a demand for a philosophical inquiry into the state of our shared Humanity in the present day ‘broken world’. The situation of ‘the broken world’ is a state of loss of sense of being. Its consequence is the degradation of being, which in our own case, has indirectly contributed to the worsening insecurity and destruction of lives and properties in Nigeria. The demand for being gives rise to being. Gabriel Marcel in his ontology taught of the question of existence of man as a mystery in which being attains fullness by participating in this mystery. It is something that cannot be investigated by scientific experimentation like the case of objects. One naturally feels superior to anything that is within his mental and physical grip. Some philosophies of being have considered being including the being of man from the perspective of something within human manipulation and control. The consequences of this approach is a form of reductionism in which man is considered as any other object out there that can be toolled. In this sense human dignity is judged by his/her social output and human relationship is built on utility. It is against this background that this paper titled; “Gabriel Marcel’s idea of ‘longing for transcendence and re-humanization in Nigeria”; an existential anthropology of Gabriel Marcel, was chosen as a template for re-humanization in Nigeria. It argues that despite the fact that our own country is plagued with corruption, insecurity, anxiety from unemployment, terrorism, poverty, nepotism etc; it is optimistic that it (Nigeria) can still be re-humanized through restructuring of thoughts, restoration of human dignity and promotion of ideal human relationships via love, fidelity and patriotic acts, thereby discovering the true meaning of life in our meaninglessness situation.

Introduction

From the ancient epoch of philosophy to the contemporary, the question of being has been a recurrent one though assuming varied formulations. In ancient philosophy, it bordered on what kind of things existed and their properties. In medieval scholasticism, it has 'God' or the 'being as being' as its central focus. Modern philosophers bothered themselves with the question of existence rather than the things that exist. Analytic philosophy in the twentieth century, focused on whether being is just a property possessed by everything that is. However, existentialists, such as Heidegger, Sartre and Tillich have used the question of being as the foundation of their philosophy. The central concern in their philosophies of being is the problem related to human condition. Gabriel Marcel, a French philosopher tows this line in building a philosophy on an ontological foundation.

Thus, this work written in the spirit of Marcel is divided into three main parts; section one which is the introduction incorporates the analysis and surveys on the true meaning of Being as accounted by some philosophers whose writings offer intriguing clues about how Being should be understood. Section two gives a purview of the general situation of things in Nigeria and identifies those factors which have contributed to its brokenness. Then, section three offers the necessary remedy for the proper healing of the nation and recommends Marcel's inter-subjectivity as vehicle for proper re-humanization and restructuring of thoughts.

Marcel departed from a critique of Cartesian duality and its implications for our human experiences. The Cartesian mind-body dualism divides the human person into two distinct beings; the '*res cogitans*' (thinking thing) and the '*res extensa*' (an extended body). By this, as Lawhead (214) says, he recognized two main categories of substances: mental substance and physical substance. This simply implies that the mind and the body are two completely different entities. Rene Descartes prioritized the thinking thing as the criterion for being, hence *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. In this sense, " your mind is the 'real' you. If you lose an arm or a leg, your bodily mechanism is impaired but you are still a complete person as before. In this way, consciousness or thought which is abstract is placed over and above existence. Cartesianism has a wide spread influence in western philosophy and other disciplines. One of its influences is that it gave science authority over the physical world in which the human being (*res extensa*) is one of the objects of scientific experimentation. The implication of this understanding in human experience is the take off point of this inquiry. The Cartesian dualism introduced division into concrete human experience.

Marcel for a long time was reluctant to make use of the idea of being. His investigation of the idea was as a result of the tragic situation of what he calls the 'broken world' following the First World War in which the ontological weight of the human experience was missing and not for any abstract consideration. The impact of this world war

experience changed his world view or perception about the human person and triggered in him the urge to develop an ontology that sees Being as a mystery. Marcel in his ontology wants to draw attention to the relevance of considering the individual's concrete life situation, hence he adopts the phenomenological method because it is capable of manifesting the structure of being and hence an ontology whose point of departure is the being of the one who poses the question about being, which is the human subject.

Consequently, some authors have referred to his ontology as a 'concrete ontology'. Human beings as they continue to exist in the world must necessarily have experiences which condition and shape their lives. In our own times there are obvious dehumanizing experiences of the human person at various levels and in various forms; instances of disregard of human dignity, lack of trust and mutual respect still abound. What human beings experience as beings in the world has preoccupied philosophers especially those of the existentialist camp.

In analyzing the concept of 'being' in Gabriel Marcel, Robert Ostermann (387) in his article: "Gabriel Marcel and the Mystery of Being", draws attention to the misleading nature of language in the description of the word "mystery" and recalls the distinction between 'the mysterious and the problematic' as Marcel did, in contrast to the already established notion of mystery as an agnostic paradise or the Kantian unknown things in themselves. Marcel believes that what is called mystery which is taken to be something abstract and beyond man is a necessary condition of our word. Ostermann (388) commenting on this position, writes that Marcel's intention was to "exorcise the demon of existentialism, to isolate and identify its perils," and this he achieved through employing an objective method. The mystery of being should not be in anyway considered as a problem but should be seen as a *meta-problem*. According to Ostermann (388), this is because a problem is something outside one while a mystery on the other hand "contains me, my relation to it is not that of two objects face to face. It is greater than the human thought." In this very sense, Ostermann believes that the problem of being is more than a problem, and it has no technique to solve it.

Hence, every investigation into the problem of being becomes a question about mystery. Ostermann (289-290) believes that the successes in techniques and mechanical devices lead human beings to forget that they are involved in the problem of being. He writes that "being involved is a fundamental circumstance of human existence and falsifying our position in reality leads to failure, frustration, and hopelessness" (289-290). This problem widens more into the *meta-problematic* which is the problem of distinguishing between objectivity and existence. From this analysis on problem and *meta-problem*, it is quite obvious that "being is mysterious," (391) because it possesses the ability to be involved and at the same time, not to be involved. It is in this very realm that the human person takes centrality in everything. The ontological need is included and also proceeds from such. The human person is both the "investigated and the investigator." Such is

both the superior subject, as well as the object and just as being is both a problem and meta-problem, so is the individual. Hence, the human person according to Marcel is the only being from whom both the problem and the meta-problem can be solved.

Conclusively, Ostermann (398) takes the stand that from every angle of one's existence there is always a "mysterious gap or dissimilarity between me and my life and it is mysterious just because a person is a mystery and localizes in himself the very kernel of the *meta-problematic*." Unlike scholars like Sartre, with his contradictory self-creating myth, Marcel believes and sees the human person as a spiritual reality in virtue of his ability to alter and change his being.

Commenting on Marcel's postulation in his article: "The Dialogical principle and the Mystery of Being: the enduring relevance of Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel", Robert E. Wood (83) notes that Gabriel Marcel though popular in his time up to the 70s only comes to mind when the 'I-Thou' is mentioned. The I-Thou is an essential component of the human reality and consequently makes his thoughts still relevant. What one sees in Marcel's thoughts reveals to one his deep religiosity. On this account, Marcel has even once testified that his work was a generalization of his Christian faith and thus available to all humans, whatever their peculiar religious or non religious commitment. In Marcel, there is a return to the sense of the whole from the abstract. The ontological mystery or rather Mystery of being centres on 'wholeness'. The idea of mystery has its take off from the notion of problem. Its focal point is the relationship with the 'thou'. It is therefore a 'metaphysics of 'we are'. The point of interest in the notion of problem is its character of excluding the investigating subject.

Mystery in contrast as Wood (85) notes, includes me as one who experiences and inquires. A problem can exist in the regions of the sensory, mathematical procedures and logical analysis. It is in considering the involvement of the subject in knowing the object that we enter into the realm of mystery. Sensation as participation in one's own body is the source of his development of the idea of mystery. From participation in my own body grows that of participating in the life of the other by fact of being part of the material world and then participation in God through faith, hope and love developed in and through community with others. "Feeling is the sign of participation" (85); it makes the other known to the self, it is a felt identity with the significant other. All this is sustained by a global sense of participating in Being as a whole, culminating in the felt presence of the Absolute Thou." (85). At the first level of participation; the level of abstraction, the level of the notion of problem, we are lead to the contemporary situation of the 'Broken World'. At this point, there is need to avert the consequent alienation from the elements that constitute our natural life-world.

Robert Wood (94) concludes by remarking that this situation demands dialogue of the various factual world which was not recognized especially by the scientific technological

approach. This dialogue involves tracing back to that epicenter, which addresses us in our relations to one another as the Absolute Mystery at the heart of the Mystery of Being.

William A. Mueller (262) in a review: "The Mystery of Being I. Reflection and Mystery, II. Faith and Reality by Gabriel Marcel", observes that the question of the mystery of being is purely an example of a religion-influenced thought. For him, Gabriel Marcel is one of the most prestigious Christian Philosophers this century has ever produced. Influenced by his religion, he observed the intricacies in the being of the human person, the mysteries embedded in such a manner that makes it distinct from every other being or things in the universe.

His philosophical quest is to unravel these mysteries intrinsic in the human person and to go beyond the empirical, physical and observable constituents of such – 'transform of empiricism' (261). As Being in the world, human beings are faced with some factors that strive to break them down (atomize), devalue or devitalize them, to lessen their worth and to rob them of the beauty of existence. Some of these factors that are inimical to ones being according to Muller include; mass-thinking, mass-society, technocracy, democracy, totalitarianism, propaganda, bureaucracy and functional techniques. For Ekwuru (201), these factors try to alienate man and to make him 'a tool of his own tool', that is, to control and dominate him. Having consciously or unconsciously understood the highly esteemed position of his being, the human person strives to transcend these limiting factors to his actual existence. In order to ascertain this self-transcendence, Mueller notes Marcel position thus:

If modern man is to overcome the alienation that haunts him he must learn again to turn reflection inwardly, to experience the wonder of his being, to see his existence as a gift of divine grace, to probe with utmost seriousness into the question, "Who am I?", and to respond to the deep call of God who alone can make us whole (Mueller, 262).

Inclined to his religion, Mueller posits that Marcel sees God as the panacea to the problem of worth and meaning faced by human beings in the universe. For him, the mystery of a person's being comes from his likeness with God, thus such need to go back to God in order to be restored to his original state. Marcel is an existentialist philosopher, but in contrast to other existentialist philosophers like Nietzsche, Klege, Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre and Camus who see man's effort for self transcendence and self realization as a futile effort; he underlines man's capacity for ontological exigency from the vertical plane. For him, human effort is fruitful and with the revelation of the Logos, the eternal Word that lightens every person that cometh into the world, such is able to rise to a higher level and to transcend the things and ideologies militating against his true nature.

The Nigerian Nation as a “Broken World”

Mathai, interpreting Marcel (45), understands the existential situation of human beings in today's world as that almost synonymous with the 'broken world'; a world which constantly seeks to reduce a person to an 'object' by denying such his proper dignity. Marcel views today's world as that which in its physical make-up is ever progressive and intact, but actually, when its mainspring is examined, is far from being perfect and vigorous. With regard to the modern man, he believes that the crisis which Western man is undergoing today is a metaphysical one... a sense of disquietude which arises, in fact, from the very depths of his being. This pathetic situation of man, according to Marcel (26), is essentially a death-throe, that is, total self-destruction, instead of self-fulfillment. For J. Onyeakazi (25) “we mean that it was at this epoch that man viewed his fellow man as an object that is useful only for its functional value. He is treated and used as a mere machine and instrument, estranged from himself, others and God. Finally, man became a wolf to his fellow man, denying his own being and its call for transcendence.

The purpose of the broken world is to understand the deep significance of inter-subjectivity in the perplexed situation of the individual in today's world and how attempts could be made to salvage it. Unfortunately, this damage has been so disastrous to the point of even eclipsing the sense of humanity that has for long characterized human operations and thinking. In this damage, to put it simply, the human person is no longer treated as a being with dignity and respect, but as a new material for objectification.

Some Existential Challenges in Nigeria

A look into the state of our shared humanity in Nigeria confirms that the Nigerian State is actually 'broken' in view of some existential challenges that are in reality de-humanizing her citizens, depriving them of their basic rights shelter, food, quality education, etc. Prominent among them are as follow:

Absence of Rule of Law

One of the major problems confronting the Nigerian State today is the lack of rule of law. This lack has entered into every fabric of the Nigerian state. It has become a quasi norm because successive governments through their actions have demonstrated absolute lack of respect for the constitution, making it seems like one is in a failed state. In this way, there are cases of extra-judicial killings; violations of fundamental human rights and many other issues that are clearly undermining the proper adherence to the rule of law. As a nascent democracy, Nigeria needs its citizens and governments to conform to the rule of law if it hopes to strengthen its constitution, institutions and national integration (Onyeakazi, 9). He reiterates that the incessant cases of disobedience to the constitution and the instrument of rule of law signals great danger to the foundation of the Nigerian state today.

Poverty/Deprivation

In addition to the absence of order is the deprivation of basic amenities which are necessary for conducive living. It appears that each day that passes, Nigerians are becoming poorer and poorer and many have taken to suicide to end their worsening situation. The state of the nation's economy is so worrisome that it is contributing to individual(s) frustration and submission to all sorts of vices and crimes as a way of survival or as a way to let out desperation and hopelessness. Poverty is one of the factors that destabilize the individual person and the institution of the state, hence its eradication or reduction is a sure root to restore hope, so as to bring the down trodden back to life and ensure effective national integration and unity

Insecurity

The issues of protection of lives and properties seem to have been forgotten alternatives in Nigeria. The terrorism occasioned by Boko Haram bombings and attacks, kidnappings, herdsmen/farmers clashes, increasing armed robbery and banditry, as well as rising levels of kidnappings, religious intolerance and hate-motivated speeches and actions portray Nigeria as a field of steady bloodshed and conflicts and probably one of the most disunited and disorganized nations of the world. Human life costs nothing in Nigeria. The panic state of the nation is a reflection of the state of mind of its citizens and their fear for the future of the nation. Insecurity stands as one obstacle confronting the building of strong national integration that can help the country to forge ahead with significant developmental strides (Udeh, Okoroafor & Ihezue, 93-109).

Corruption

The issue of corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian society to the extent that it is fast becoming an integral part of our mainstream culture. It pervades our life so completely today that one may be justified in calling it condition par excellence of contemporary Nigeria. Right from independence, Nigeria has been known as a corrupt nation, but the level today is sky rocketing. The worsening aspect of this cankerworm is that it has eaten deep into every field of the society; the political, educational and religious.

Poor Leadership/Governance

The quality of leadership and governance in Nigeria leaves much to be desired or appreciated due largely to the insensitivity and gross mismanagement of the nation's resources in the past decades. The Nigerian problem is deeply rooted in poor leadership or inability of its leaders to rise to the problems of the nation. The crop of leaders we have today are unfortunately people without integrity.

Good leadership is said to beget good followership and therefore, the poor leadership and governance in the country is breeding a weak, docile and unpatriotic citizens who are

aggrieved with the state of the nation and seem to be motivated towards disintegration of the nation to satisfy ethnic sentiments and other primordial interests (Onyeakazi, 11).

Ethnicism/Nepotism

To say that many Nigerians are tribalistic and nepotistic may be a clear understatement of the situation in the country. A lot of Nigerians are ethnocentric in their perception of issues concerning the integrity of the nation as a united democratic entity. Their behavior exhibits the ethnic/tribal inclinations and antecedents that only aggravate the poor state of solidarity and unity among the nation's many ethnic groups, creating social tension and disorder. The attitude of nepotism which further fuels disunity has not helped Nigeria's efforts towards nation building and national integration. Okoroafor *et al* (99-120) posit that "this status quo is obviously anti-national unity because it breeds national discord, disunity and fear that undermine national integration" (Onyeakazi, 11).

Intersubjectivity as Vehicle for Re-Humanization

In the face of the tragic situation obtainable in the Nigerian state, the search for possible solution continues. Marcel (146) argues that inter-subjectivism has one concern, which is to overcome the dehumanizing and the degrading of the human person to an empty shell weighed down by the parasite of wickedness and so makes it impossible for the human person to pursue fulfillment through its own inner being.

In light of this need for reassessment, therefore, Marcel advocates the precept of intersubjectivism which consists in mutual communion as a profitable step to shun all manipulative and commercial tendencies that play on the integrity of the human person. He denounces the abuse and the consequent dehumanization of man, on which ground consists the radical denial of truth and freedom. He identifies the following as tools for re-humanization.

Hope as a Mysterious Principle of Re-humanization

According to Gabriel Marcel, "hope" is one of the most fundamental human experiences, a primordial assurance of the "*gaudium essendi*" (the joy of existing), a concrete approach par excellence, to the mystery of participation and communion in being.

We, as a country should be hopeful that this country will be better tomorrow and not to give in to despair.

Hope involves the refusal to calculate the limits of the possible; hence we cannot allow ourselves to be condemned to a life devoid of a better tomorrow. Hope is always situated within the framework of tribulation; the growing cases of suicide in Nigeria recent times testify to the fact that many Nigerians are overwhelmed by the difficulties of the moment. The distinguishing mark of hope is that it almost immediately and unequivocally orients and projects the hopeful person towards continued participation in life. Marcel is of the opinion that hope cannot exist without being in fundamental

relation, that is, in opposition to despair; it is that which makes a person accept the trials and difficulties in life as part and parcel of human life.

Christian anthropology tells us that the human person has the natural capacity to surmount challenging problems from the environment, so as to attain his natural exigency. Hence, Nigerians should not give in to hopelessness and despondency which trigger depressions or strong urge for suicide. The difficulties of the moment will not last forever. Efforts should be made to refute some western philosophers or thinkers like Sartre who strongly propagate or advocate despair rather than hope. Moved by this state of affairs, Ekwuru citing Dietmar Lenfer on the ontological task of intersubjectivity as the recuperation of the deepest essential reality of the human person asserts thus:

The attempt to elaborate on the peculiar nature of the human person has given rise to some personalist philosophies and civil rights movement in the contemporary period of Western history. The depreciation of the value of the human person in the modernist philosophical thought calls for a concerted effort toward the revaluation of the ontological greatness of the human person. This makes metaphysical explication of the nuances of the term person, a very important theme for Philosophical Anthropological investigation. (Ekwuru, 281-282).

From the above, it is obvious to affirm that while today's state of affairs calls for worry, however, it is an invitation to restore the social order which has been disarranged by extreme technologization and industrialization. Even though technology serves numberless benefits to man, at the other hand, mention must be made of the various atrocities which have been unleashed under its cover. And while its side effects almost seem to speak more than its benefits, unfortunately some of these technological apparatus continue to flood the list of instruments of manipulation used to degrade, objectify and pursue unholy interests against the wellbeing and integrity of the human person. Thus it goes to say that any technological arrangement that serves the interest of the self as against that of "Others" by utilizing the human person as a means is false and unworthy of the name.

Love as the Concrete Approach to Re-humanization

In Marcelian thought, love is the most dynamic concrete approach to re-humanization, for it is love that most effectively breaks the tension and crosses the barrier that exists between the self and the other. Lack of the virtue of love in our country has been identified as one of the cogs in the wheels of our progress. It rears its ugly head especially in the forms of racism, nepotism, oppressive ideologies, religion, etc. As against the principles of love that define human beings, man-made forms of

characterization have taken the center-stage of our social climate, sweeping off traditional ways of being, relating and acting; that today love is no longer thinkable on the basis of humanity but on ideologies, social standing, achievements and acquaintances.

Love Marcel asserts might be called “the essential ontological datum” which alone can deliver philosophers and philosophy from the rut of objectification and the prison of problematization (G. Marcel, 117).

The point Marcel tried to underline here is that love is not problematic, but *meta-problematic*; thus revealing its transcendent orientation. He elaborates further thus:

Love is *metaproblematic*. It is “the active refusal to treat itself as subjective,” and thus far forth must appear to itself as perfect knowledge,”... love is charged with cognitive potentialities to the precise extent that it is love. It is not that love is blind and knows nothing; it is simply that reflection only discovers its cognitive value insofar as it ... ceases to pose love as an appearance whose correspondence to a reality needs to be demonstrated. At this point reflection passes over into secondary reflection, whose function “will consist especially in demonstrating that the refusal to treat itself as subjective is transcendent in relation to criticism to which primary reflection would claim to subject it (K.T. Gallagher, 56.)

The point Marcel is making here is that love emanates from the whole being of a person. This is true because in love, the epistemological subject-object categories are transcended, thereby making the attainment of subject-to-subject/ “I-Thou” relationship possible. It means an active refusal to treat itself as “subjective”, thereby pointing to the value of the other. In this sense, the beloved is never the object or the abstract idea or essence, but always the unique person who is open to me and I to him. Since love overcomes the tension between the self and the other, no longer is the other a “he”, “it”, Hausa, Yoruba or Ibo, but instead “a thou”. That means love is only possible where there is a genuine and honest feeling of being-together, of being-present to one another, a co-presence (T.A. Mattai, 70).

In light of the primacy of love in Marcel's thought, we can say that it forms the bedrock of his existential philosophical thought “I love therefore I am”; it is also to be considered as the crown and apex of re-humanization in Nigeria in the sense that it most strikingly and fruitfully makes us conscious of the transcendence and plenitude of being.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion therefore, this paper reaffirms the importance of inter-subjectivity, as key to true knowledge of Being as established throughout Marcel's anthology. Marcel's vision, without mincing words, seems one of those endless voices promoting and calling for dialogues in the name of inter-subjectivity. He has left his impact on us; an impact that challenges us to re-examine our daily patterns of thought and action particularly with regard to authentic inter-personal relationship in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country like ours.

All the authors reviewed in this work are in agreement that improper knowledge of Being contributed to the difficulty being experienced today in the area of relationship in Nigeria. Blood is being shed on daily basis because we don't seem to understand that life is sacred and ought to be treated as such. It was this lack of requisite knowledge of what it means to 'be human' that has led us to this pitiable state, in the form of staunch relativism, nepotism, religious violence, exploitation and falsity, just to mention but a few. Therefore, this paper sets us in the right direction by reawakening in all and sundry the urge for genuine existence, which must find expression in our collective sense of shared humanity, responsibility, dignity, common good and a sense of purpose in life.

This paper concludes that one cannot allow one's country to be broken again and again; hence the need for a proper understanding or re-interpretation of what it means to be 'human'/being from the *meta-problematical* point of view. In that vein, the research identified hope, love, and creative fidelity as concrete epistemic tools of re-humanization.

Finally, the paper submits that the practices outlined herein will encourage open and meaningful dialogue in our country. Knowing and imbibing them will help to effect attitudinal change in our nation that is yearning for holistic (re-humanization) restructuring, so as to enhance respect for human dignity and human relationships in Nigeria.

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