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Communication of Existence: Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel

Abstract: The article compares Kierkegaard's and Marcel's comprehension of existence and communication of existence. With reference to the notion of existence, both authors (independently from each other) develop the idea of a second reflection that includes a theory of communication. But whereas Kierkegaard conceives communication strictly within a first person perspective, Marcel establishes a kind of second person perspective. For this reason and despite a strong common basis in their views, different aspects of communication of existence are put forward by them.

The philosophies of Søren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel or other existential philosophers are first person perspective philosophies. Third person knowledge, mainly scientific knowledge in the sense of 20th/21st century sciences like physics or biology, is not a permanent source of their thinking or significant for their philosophical method. One of the interesting features of the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard and Marcel I want to focus on is that both elaborate different kinds of first person perspectives and that the one that matters to them, the one that refers to the notion of existence, for both authors includes the idea of an inter-subjective communication of existence. In other words, I will compare their comprehension of existence and communication of existence.¹

First of all, there is a basic difference in their understanding of existence: whereas Kierkegaard remains entirely within a strict first person perspective, Marcel establishes a kind of second person perspective, or let us say a first person perspective that includes or is extended to some second person perspective. By second person perspective I mean the idea of a mutual empathy. Because of this difference, then, different aspects of communication of existence are put forward by both authors. There has been a general dispute on whether Kierkegaard's and Marcel's philosophy are mutually exclusive or not. Concerning

¹ An earlier version of this paper has been presented at the "SKC Annual Conference 2017. Reconsidering the Existential: Existence and Communication" at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Copenhagen (August, 16–18, 2017).

this dispute, my conclusion will be—with Malagon² and against Anderson³—that despite the differences, their views of an existential first person perspective have a strong common basis.

I Kierkegaard

For the purpose of comparing Kierkegaard with Marcel, I am not going to deal here with the relationship of Kierkegaard to his pseudonyms and the relationship of the pseudonyms among themselves. My interpretation will be mainly based on Kierkegaard's understanding of existence and communication of existence in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, i.e., on the special kind of first person perspective and the communicative implications developed in this writing.⁴

A Objective and Subjective Reflection

What are the two first person perspectives that Climacus—from now on just, Kierkegaard—describes in the *Postscript*? First we can reflect on things through objective thought. We are then neutral subjects turned toward objects as

2 Anthony Malagon, “The Existential Approach to God in Kierkegaard and Marcel: A Conciliatory Study,” *Marcel Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–23.

3 Thomas C. Anderson, “The Experiential Paths to God in Kierkegaard and Marcel,” *Philosophy Today*, vol. 26, 1982, pp. 22–40.

4 I do not mean that Kierkegaard's views on communication are identical or can be reduced to those of Climacus, but the *Postscript* is the central writing for Kierkegaard's view on communication of existence and the one relevant for a comparison with Gabriel Marcel. As to the ongoing discussion on Kierkegaard's authorship, it may help just to mention that contrary to other Kierkegaard scholars I consider the understanding of communication of existence in the *Postscript* to be very much the same as in other of his writings. Particularly *The Point of View* does not seem to me to exhibit a different idea than the one we find in the *Postscript* contrarily to the position of Joakim Garff in “‘To produce was my life’: Problems and Perspectives within the Kierkegaardian Biography,” in *Kierkegaard Revisited: Proceedings from the Conference ‘Kierkegaard and the Meaning of Meaning It’, Copenhagen, May 5–9, 1996*, ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Jon Stewart, New York: Walter de Gruyter 1997 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 1), pp. 75–93, and in “The Eyes of Argus: The Point of View and Points of View on Kierkegaard's Work as an Author,” in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain, Malden, MA: Blackwell 1998, pp. 75–102. I basically agree with the critique of Mark A. Tietjen, *Kierkegaard, Communication, and Virtue. Authorship as Edification*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2013, pp. 64–85.

something outside the subject, producing true propositions. Kierkegaard does not talk about true propositions but about truth: “When truth is asked about objectively, reflection is directed objectively at truth as an object to which the knower relates.”⁵ The neutral subject is not interested in the relation of this objective thought to himself as a subject: “...objective thought is indifferent to the thinking subject.”⁶

But we can also seek truth for our own life as living individuals, truth that helps us to know what we ought to do in our timely, finite existence. In contrast to the neutral subject of objective knowledge “whose existence or non-existence becomes...infinitely indifferent,” such an individual, Kierkegaard calls him a subjective thinker,⁷ is “infinitely interested in existing.”⁸ Now he describes existence as the constant striving of an individual.⁹ Striving necessarily means pursuing goals. For the subjective thinker infinitely interested in existing, the main question therefore is what goals he ought to pursue, which are good and which are bad. In the broadest sense of the word this is an ethical issue. It is in this sense, I think, that Kierkegaard primarily uses the notion of the *ethical* in the *Postscript*.¹⁰ To be striving, necessarily means to live ethically. To live ethically means to relate a truth to one’s existence in terms of what this truth means for the life of the individual.¹¹

5 SKS 7, 182 / CUPH, 167. Quotations in English are given from Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by Alastair Hannay, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009 (CUPH).

6 SKS 7, 73 / CUPH, 62. Or: “The path of objective reflection leads to abstract thinking, to mathematics, to historical knowledge of various kinds, and always leads away from the subject, whose existence or non-existence becomes, and from the objective point of view quite rightly, infinitely indifferent...” (SKS 7, 177 / CUPH, 163).

7 “The subjective thinker’s task is to understand himself in existence” (SKS 7, 321 / CUPH, 294).

8 SKS 7, 275 / CUPH, 253.

9 “Existence itself, existing, is a striving...” (SKS 7, 90 / CUPH, 78).

10 Maybe this is what he wants to express with a sentence like: “The continued striving expresses the existing subject’s ethical life view” (SKS 7, 113 / CUPH, 103).

11 To be interested in existing is not just to be concerned about what one ought to do in one’s finite life. Life or existence is more than finite. It is, as Kierkegaard expresses it, a synthesis of the infinite and the finite (cf. SKS 7, 91 / CUPH, 78). And it is precisely our striving that is “directed towards the infinite” (ibid.). It is the striving that makes us such a synthesis. Therefore, once the individual realises that his striving is basically directed toward the infinite or, as Kierkegaard often calls it, toward eternal happiness, his concern is not only an ethical but at the same time a religious one.

B Self-Feeling

Now, how do we, as subjective thinkers, come into touch with our own existence? There is a form of self-awareness different from self-reflection as an activity of reflecting on ourselves in terms of conceptual thinking, of objective knowledge. Self-reflection would mean to transform the reality or actuality of ourselves into a possibility, because “all knowledge about actuality is possibility.”¹² To think that I am this or that means to think about myself in terms of a projection of my mind without being in touch with my real being by doing it. Of course, if the individual acts according to what he is thinking, he “cancels the possibility and identifies himself with what is thought, in order to exist in it.”¹³ But doing, loving or having faith would not be possible without a special kind of self-awareness which is not self-reflection.¹⁴ Kierkegaard describes it as a form of being in touch with one’s own actuality as such: “The only actuality that one who exists has more than a knowledge of, is his own actuality, the fact that he is there, and this actuality is his absolute interest.”¹⁵ And he identifies this actuality with the ethical. The ethical is “the only actuality that does not become a possibility by being known and cannot be known just by being thought...”¹⁶

What kind of self-awareness is this? Kierkegaard almost never mentions it directly, but obviously he means a self-feeling. Indirectly it is evidenced when he equates subjectivity with passion,¹⁷ particularly when he calls the relationship to God an infinite passion for eternal happiness,¹⁸ the “maximum” of passion,¹⁹ the “supreme effort” (“*yderste Anstrængelse*”) of subjectivity,²⁰ equivalent to faith.²¹ There cannot be such a passion without a self-awareness

12 SKS 7, 288 / CUPH, 264.

13 SKS 7, 310 / CUPH, 284. The same is true for love and faith. We exist in what we love and have faith in (SKS 7, 314 f. / CUPH, 288 f.).

14 That Kierkegaard’s understanding of the human subject presupposes such a self-awareness has been extensively analysed in Jörg Disse, “Das unmittelbare Selbstverhältnis bei Søren Kierkegaard,” *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1992, pp. 17–34.

15 SKS 7, 288 / CUPH, 264.

16 One could also refer to the notion of inwardness (SKS 7, 296 / CUPH, 272).

17 SKS 7, 123 / CUPH, 109 (cf. SKS 7, 39 / CUPH, 29).

18 SKS 7, 39 / CUPH, 29; SKS 7, 60 / CUPH, 49.

19 SKS 7, 39 / CUPH, 29.

20 SKS 7, 39 / CUPH, 46.

21 SKS 7, 124 / CUPH, 110.

of it in terms of a feeling.²² At its maximum it will be a self-awareness accompanying our being in touch with God through infinite passion.²³ And in this context there is indeed one direct mention of a self-feeling. Eternal happiness grounds in an “abstracting self-feeling of subjectivity” (“*Subjektivitetens...fragdragende Selvfølelse*”).²⁴ Kierkegaard doesn’t explain what he means by “abstracting” (“*fragdragend*”) here. I suggest he means the feeling of one’s feelings independently of their content. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, to become subjective, which is the highest aim for a subject, is to relate to oneself and to God on the ground of a self-feeling.²⁵ It is making of it a criterion of one’s behaviour in life.

C Subjective Truth

To be related to oneself in terms of a self-feeling and to make of it a criterion of one’s behaviour in life is, I would say, to be interested in one’s own existence. And to live in such a way is also to be directed to another kind of truth, to subjective truth as Kierkegaard calls it.

Subjective truth is a truth that is true for existence, for the timely, finite existing subject. Generally, by “subjective truth” Kierkegaard means an objective truth becoming a truth for one’s own existence. This is what subjective thought, or as Kierkegaard also calls it, subjective reflection is mainly about. By subjective reflection the existing subject relates some objective truth to his own existence or subjectivity.²⁶ As Kierkegaard expresses it: “If truth is asked about subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively on the individual’s relation.”²⁷ What is meant is the individual’s relation to an objective truth. With reference to the knowledge of God, Kierkegaard describes it in the following way: “Objectively, reflection is on it being the true God, subjectively on the individual relating to something in such a way that his relation is truly a God-relationship.”²⁸ Subjective reflection is

²² We usually cannot feel passion for something without feeling our feeling of passion. In every feeling of something there is a self-feeling implied. The only exception would be unconscious emotionality.

²³ Cf. *SKS* 7, 39 / *CUPH*, 29.

²⁴ *SKS* 7, 59 / *CUPH*, 49, translation modified.

²⁵ In Disse, “Das unmittelbare Selbstverhältnis bei Søren Kierkegaard,” pp. 25 f. and pp. 28 f., I show that such a self-feeling can also be found in *The Concept of Anxiety*.

²⁶ Cf. *SKS* 7, 77 / *CUPH*, 65.

²⁷ *SKS* 7, 182 / *CUPH*, 167 f.

²⁸ *SKS* 7, 182 / *CUPH*, 168.

a reflection that “turns in towards subjectivity”;²⁹ it is inwardness or reflection of inwardness, as Kierkegaard also calls it.³⁰

More precisely, in order to reach subjective truth, we need a double reflection: Objectively we think the universal, subjectively we make of it something significant for the isolated subject we are: “The reflection of inwardness is the subjective thinker’s double reflection. In thinking, he thinks the universal, but as existing in this thinking, as assimilating this in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated.”³¹ It is this reflection of inwardness, a reflection based on our emotional self-awareness, that leads to the kind of first person perspective that has real import: “All essential knowing concerns existence, or only such knowing as has an essential relation to existence is essential, is essential knowing.”³²

D Communication of Existence

Subjective reflection based on self-feeling relates the individual to itself or, which is the same, makes it being related to its own existence, or, which is still the same, makes an existing subject of it. But this is not yet *communication* of existence if we understand communication in the strict sense of an interpersonal relationship. Stressing the importance of existence and subjective reflection leads Kierkegaard to address the question of how to communicate existence to somebody else. I do not mean to explain to anybody what existence is, which would be the communication of objective knowledge, but to make him accomplish the inner movement of being concerned about his own existence. How can I communicate subjectivity or subjective truth if communication is mainly based on the exchange of information as the result of objective thought? Kierkegaard explicitly uses the expression “communication of existence” several times in the *Postscript* for this kind of communication.³³ How can we, for

29 SKS 7, 180 / CUPH, 165.

30 SKS 7, 181 / CUPH, 166.

31 SKS 7, 73f. / CUPH, 62.

32 SKS 7, 181 / CUPH, 166. Making of our self-feeling a criterion for deciding about a subjective truth may go as far as objective truth becoming indifferent to subjective truth. If passion is at its maximum, says Kierkegaard, the object is the right object, even if the subject has the wrong objective knowledge: “...if only the how of this relation is in truth, then the individual is in truth, even if he related in this way to untruth” (SKS 7, 186 / CUPH, 171), what is meant, is objective untruth, e.g. the one who prays truly God though he worships an idol (cf. SKS 7, 184 / CUPH, 169). Thus the passion of the infinite becomes the choice of the objectively uncertain.

33 Cf. SKS 7, 346 (“*Existents-Meddelelse*”) / CUPH, 318 (“existence-communication”).

example, communicate subjective truth with the help of “communication through books,” he asks?³⁴ How and what do I have to write in order to communicate existence?

For describing this kind of communication Kierkegaard introduces the notion of second reflection. I think we have to distinguish here between subjective reflection and second reflection. They are not identical. Second reflection includes subjective reflection as it reflects on the communication of subjective truth to another person.³⁵ For Kierkegaard this kind of communication is done again by a double reflection. With first reflection an objective thought is expressed; first reflection therefore is identical with objective thought. Then comes second reflection which is described in the following way: It is a reflection “which concerns the relation between that which is being imparted and the imparter, and reflects the existing imparter’s relation to the idea” (“*der betræffer Meddelsens eget Forhold til Meddeleren og gjengiver den eksisterende Meddelsers eget Forhold til Ideen*”).³⁶ Second reflection therefore has two aspects. It includes subjective thought as it “reflects the imparter’s relation to the idea,” and it reflects “the relation between that which has been imparted (to somebody else) and the imparter,” which I would say means a reflection on the form of that which is being imparted so that the form reflects the relationship of the imparter to the idea. Second reflection is concerned, one could say, with the question: If I want to impart a subjective truth (my relation to an idea, not just the idea as such) to another, how am I going to do it? What will be the form of my communication in order to communicate this relation?

Now, existence, subjective truth or inwardness cannot, says Kierkegaard, “be imparted directly,”³⁷ i. e., by just explaining what it is. It cannot be imparted by objective communication. Objective communication may help one understand existence objectively, but it does not help make the inner move of existing in what is understood: “Existing in what is understood cannot be directly communicated to an existing spirit, not even by God, still less by a human being.”³⁸ The same is true for Christian belief as far as it is a way of existing: “It could not be done by direct communication, since this is always only pertinent to a recipient in terms of knowledge, not essentially to one who exists.”³⁹ To impart inwardness means that inwardness is being produced in

³⁴ SKS 7, 250 / CUPH, 232.

³⁵ SKS 7, 77 / CUPH, 65.

³⁶ SKS 7, 77 / CUPH, 65, translation modified.

³⁷ SKS 7, 236 / CUPH, 218.

³⁸ SKS 7, 249 / CUPH, 230.

³⁹ Ibid.

the individual it is communicated to. And to be produced in such a way means that by its own activity the individual himself initiates a self-relationship of inwardness, initiates “the self-activity of appropriation,” as Kierkegaard calls it.⁴⁰ The attempt to communicate existence or inwardness can only be the encouragement to this self-activity.⁴¹

For Kierkegaard, communication of existence seems always to involve some utterance of words. Something that can be objectively grasped is being said. But the core of this kind of communication is communication of inwardness or existence as something beyond words, as something that can only be disclosed in between or despite the words. Ideally the words disappear to clear space for inwardness: “...to receive inwardness is not to reproduce what is imparted directly, for that is echo. The repetition of inwardness is the resonance in which what is said remains absent...”⁴² My interpretation is: What is said (i.e. the words) becomes secondary. There is the resonance of something accompanying the words, and if the recipient receives it, then “the thing said belongs to the recipient as if it were his own,”⁴³ i.e., it has become inwardness to the recipient. In that sense the reception of inwardness includes the resonance of something that is beyond words. This is probably why Kierkegaard calls inwardness a secret: “The ordinary communication, objective thinking, has no secrets; it is only with doubly reflected subjective thinking that secrets arise, i.e., all of its essential content is essentially secret because it cannot be imparted directly.”⁴⁴

40 SKS 7, 220 / CUPH, 203.

41 In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard compares indirect communication of existence with our indirect access to God through his creation. Nature is God’s work, but God is not visible in nature. God himself avoids any direct relationship to mankind: “For no anonymous author is able to hide himself more cunningly, no maieutic artist is able to avoid the direct relation more painstakingly than God” (SKS 7, 221 / CUPH, 204). How then do we recognise God in nature? “The observer does not slip into the result directly but must be at pains to find it by himself, and thereby break the direct relation” (ibid.). God is omnipresent in nature. But the only way to recognize it, is to be awakened into a God-relationship by “turning in towards one’s own subjectivity...Nature, the totality of creation, is God’s work. And yet God is not there, but within the individual human being there is a possibility...that is awakened in inwardness into a God-relationship, and then it is possible to see God everywhere” (SKS 7, 224 / CUPH, 206f.). In similar terms he considers the presence of God in Christ in *Practice in Christianity* as to be seen only indirectly.

42 SKS 7, 236 / CUPH, 218.

43 Ibid.

44 SKS 7, 79 / CUPH, 67. Pseudonymous writing is for Kierkegaard just one way, one strategy of paying attention to “the relation of indirect communication to truth as inwardness” as he explains in the “Appendix” to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (SKS 7, 229 / CUPH, 211).

II Marcel and Kierkegaard

Let us now compare Marcel's approach with Kierkegaard's. The French existential philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) didn't know much of Kierkegaard's work and developed his philosophy quite independently, stating himself that Kierkegaard's influence on his thinking seems to him "practically non-existent."⁴⁵ There are only a few explicit references to Kierkegaard in the writings of Gabriel Marcel.⁴⁶ The only work of Kierkegaard that made a lasting impression on him was according to Marcel the *Postscript*, but he only read it in 1940 or 1941, well after having worked out the main characteristics of his own philosophy from 1915 on. The writings of Marcel that I am going to refer to are mainly the second part of the *Metaphysical Journal* from 1915–1923,⁴⁷ *The Philosophy of Existence*,⁴⁸ the continuation of the metaphysical journal (1928–1933) in *Being and Having*,⁴⁹ *Creative Fidelity*⁵⁰ and *The Mystery of Being* published in 1951.⁵¹ This last writing is the only one indisputably following the more detailed reception of the *Postscript*. But no new insights related to the influence of Kierkegaard can be found in these *Gifford Lectures*. All things considered, there is not much of a direct influence of Kierkegaard on Marcel.⁵² But there are astonishing points of convergence in their thinking which ground their understanding of existence or let us say their idea of a first person perspective related to the notion of

45 Gabriel Marcel, "Kierkegaard en ma pensée," in *Kierkegaard vivant. Colloque organisé par l'UNESCO à Paris du 21 au 23 avril 1964*, Paris: Gallimard 1966, pp. 64–80, here p. 64.

46 For the exact references, see Jeannette Bresson Ladegaard Knox, "Gabriel Marcel: The Silence of Truth," in *Kierkegaard and Existentialism*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Farnham: Ashgate 2011 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 9), pp. 199–215, here p. 204.

47 *Journal Métaphysique*, Paris: Gallimard 1927 / *The Metaphysical Journal*, trans. by Bernard Wall, Chicago: Henry Regnery 1950.

48 *Positions et approches concrètes du mystère ontologique*, Louvain: Nauwelaerts 1949 / *On the Ontological Mystery*, in *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans. by Manya Harari, London: Harvill Press 1948, pp. 1–31.

49 *Être et Avoir*, Paris: Aubier 1935 / *Being and Having*, trans. by Katherine Farrer, London: A.&C. Black 1949.

50 *Essai de Philosophie concrète*, Paris: Gallimard 1967 (*Du refus à l'invocation*, Paris: Gallimard 1940) / *Creative Fidelity*, trans. by Robert Rosthal, Farrar: Strauss and Company 1964.

51 *Le Mystère de l'Être*, vols. 1–2, Paris: Association Présence de Gabriel Marcel 1997 / *The Mystery of Being*, vols. 1–2, trans. by G. S. Fraser (vol. 1) and René Hague (vol. 2), London: The Harvill Press 1951.

52 Cf. Jeanne Parain-Vidal, "Gabriel Marcel et Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard*, ed. by Jean Brun, Paris: Borderie 1981 (*Obliques*, special issue), pp. 185–191, here p. 185.

existence.⁵³ However, at the same time the importance of embodiment for Marcel leads to a different understanding of communication of existence, a communication that for him is linked to a kind of second person perspective, which is not the case for Kierkegaard.

A First Reflection

The first remarkable point of convergence is that Marcel also distinguishes between two kinds of reflection in terms of two different first person approaches to reality. But what Marcel calls first and a second reflection is not identical to what Kierkegaard means by these expressions.⁵⁴ They basically correspond to Kierkegaard's distinction between objective thought and subjective reflection.

For Marcel first reflection is, as objective thought for Kierkegaard, turned toward the object. It means reflecting without being interested in oneself as an existing subject.⁵⁵ I am turned toward an object without any perception of it participating in me as a subject, without any perception of it not being totally separated from me. The subject of first reflection is moreover one of "impersonal thinking" ("*pensée impersonnelle*"),⁵⁶ which also resembles very much Kierkegaard's neutral subject reflecting on objects as something outside the subject. According to the early Marcel, with first reflection "we treat the world as a spectacle."⁵⁷ We behave as if we could "stand aside from the universe."⁵⁸ The spectator's activity is that of "recognising a structure."⁵⁹ In other words, first reflection pertains to "the order of predication or the characterisable."⁶⁰ First reflection is also described as the realm of the problematic or the problem: "A problem is something met with which bars my passage. It is before me in its entirety."⁶¹ "Wherever a problem is found, I am working upon data placed before me; but at the same time, the general state of affairs authorises me to carry on as

53 More points of convergence as for example their affinity with Socrates are analysed by Ladegaard Knox: "Gabriel Marcel: The Silence of Truth," pp. 199–215.

54 On the parallel between two kinds of reflection in both authors cf. *ibid.* pp. 205 ff.

55 *Mystère de l'Être I*, p. 107 / *Mystery of Being I*, p. 92.

56 Gabriel Marcel, *Présence et Immortalité*, Paris: Flammarion 1959, p. 21 / *Presence and Immortality*, trans. by Michael A. Machado, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 1967, p. 17.

57 *Être et Avoir*, p. 20 / *Being and Having*, p. 23.

58 *Être et Avoir*, p. 21 / *Being and Having*, p. 24.

59 *Être et Avoir*, p. 36 / *Being and Having*, p. 36.

60 *Être et Avoir*, p. 189 / *Being and Having*, p. 164.

61 *Être et Avoir*, p. 124 / *Being and Having*, p. 109.

if I had no need to trouble myself with this Me who is at work: he is here simply presupposed.”⁶²

Finally, Marcel relates first and second reflection to the difference between having and being. The spectator’s attitude corresponds “to the act by which the subject appropriates the world for himself.”⁶³ To be turned to objects appropriating them means to apprehend in the mode of having. What we have is what cognitively speaking “can be limited, defined and intellectualised.”⁶⁴ Or, as Marcel says: “Characterisation is a certain kind of possession, or claim to possession....”⁶⁵

B Second Reflection

But what is second reflection? In Marcel’s view second reflection is disclosing what philosophy is really about.⁶⁶ For this reason it is linked to a variety of specifically Marcellian philosophical concepts, of which I can take into account only a few. A more superficial description makes him say that second reflection establishes the “relationship between reflection and life.”⁶⁷ But what does he mean by that? He certainly wants to say that it is a reflection that takes into account the concretely living or existing subject, but not in terms of an objectifying first reflection.⁶⁸ In opposition to first reflection, second reflection is a reflection interior to existence,⁶⁹ on the ground of our self-consciousness as existing,⁷⁰ or on the ground of the self-consciousness that I exist, as Marcel calls it.⁷¹

For Marcel, the *I exist* discloses itself through a reflection based on a non-reflecting self-experience in much the same way as in Kierkegaard existence is disclosed to subjective reflection through self-feeling. However, for Marcel, this experience is closely related to the experience of one’s body, of being incarnated. From a point of view of first reflection, I would be disinterested in the fact that

62 *Être et Avoir*, p. 215 / *Being and Having*, p. 185.

63 *Être et Avoir*, p. 23 / *Being and Having*, p. 25.

64 *Être et Avoir*, p. 194 / *Being and Having*, p. 169.

65 *Être et Avoir*, p. 213 / *Being and Having*, p. 183. This subordination of knowledge under the category of possession will become central for the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.

66 *Philosophie concrète*, p. 38 / *Creative Fidelity*, p. 22.

67 *Mystère de l’Être I*, p. 95 / *Mystery of Being I*, p. 81.

68 *Mystère de l’Être I*, p. 102 / *Mystery of Being I*, pp. 186f.

69 *Être et Avoir*, p. 32 / *Being and Having*, p. 33.

70 *Être et Avoir*, p. 19 / *Being and Having*, p. 14.

71 *Mystère de l’Être I*, pp. 103–105 / *Mystery of Being I*, pp. 88–90.

my body is mine. For second reflection, the experience of oneself as embodied is essential. It is given when there is no interval between my body and me, no interval from which I could, for example, consider it as an instrument of an abstract or disincarnated I.⁷² The fact that in some way we can always say *I am my body* reveals the existence of such a non-interval experience. And also for Marcel it is *feeling* my own body that allows me to say *I am my body*. He explicitly calls this feeling “the experience of the tie through which my body is mine.”⁷³ Or “My body, in so far as it is properly mine, presents itself to me in the first instance as something felt.”⁷⁴ There is no interval instantiating a reflective relationship in this experience. Possibly, Marcel remarks, we should even say that we need our body in order to feel our body so that our body is at the same time that which feels and that which is felt.⁷⁵ Though for Kierkegaard it is also through feeling that one’s existence is disclosed to oneself, he doesn’t mention the body.⁷⁶

Now the experience of existence as tied to the body is not only a feeling of oneself, but it is also an experience of the self “as tied up with the universe,”⁷⁷ a non-reflecting experience of all that is distinct from oneself. Because of this non-reflecting experience, for Marcel, second reflection is not turned to an object but to a presence. It is the universe and everything that is in the universe that is such a presence.⁷⁸ Together with the notion of presence, Marcel introduces the idea of participation, participation of the subject in that which it has before itself. Second reflection is a reflection from within participation. Instead of a search for objective knowledge related to objects, second reflection is contemplation,⁷⁹

72 *Mystère de l'Être* I, p. 116 / *Mystery of Being* I, p. 100.

73 *Mystère de l'Être* I, p. 113 (my own translation). In *Mystery of Being* I, p. 97 the word “*lien*” has not been translated.

74 *Mystère de l'Être* I, p. 117 / *Mystery of Being* I, p. 101.

75 *Mystère de l'Être* I, p. 117 / *Mystery of Being* I, p. 102.

76 We need to be slightly more precise: even if from a second reflection point of view for Marcel I experience my body as “I am my body,” at the same time there is a distance to my body. Second reflection is and remains a reflection. One should therefore say, Marcel suggests, that my body is mine and is not mine (*Être et Avoir*, p. 11 / *Being and Having*, p. 16). To be an incarnated being means to be both (*Philosophie concrète*, pp. 34 f. / *Creative Fidelity*, p. 20). But even if for second reflection my body is also not mine, the body is not considered as totally different from me as it is in first reflection. Second reflection remains “interior to existence” or one could say “interior to a body.”

77 *Mystère de l'Être* I, p. 10 / *Mystery of Being* I, p. 15.

78 *Mystère de l'Être* I, pp. 220–224 / *Mystery of Being* I, pp. 204–209.

79 *Mystère de l'Être* I, p. 138 / *Mystery of Being* I, p. 122.

contemplation as a knowing of what is known through participation in what is known.⁸⁰

As Marcel describes it in *The Mystery of Being*, to contemplate means “to recollect oneself in the presence of...” (“... *se recueillir en présence de*”).⁸¹ There are two simultaneous movements involved here. The first movement is recollection as a way of participating in ourselves or better in our own existence through self-feeling. To recollect oneself means for Marcel to grasp oneself as a unity,⁸² and it is self-feeling that allows us to grasp ourselves as such a unity. The second movement establishes our presence to the world. For Marcel, the notion of presence is tied to the notion of the mysterious or mystery. A presence is something that ultimately “cannot be limited, defined and intellectualised.”⁸³ As such it remains a mystery for the subject that is confronted to it. Whereas the problem is something that is “before me in its entirety,” the mystery “is something in which I find myself caught up, and whose essence is therefore not before me in its entirety.”⁸⁴ To find myself caught up with something means that I “refer it to my own lived existence” (“... *de référer ces données à [ma] propre existence vécue*”),⁸⁵ or better, to my own self-experience as an existing subject. But it is not referred to in an egoistic sense, in the sense of how I am going to instrumentalize what is before me for my needs (that would be first reflection), but in the sense that, as Marcel says, a *co-esse* is realised between me or my self-experience and what is before me.⁸⁶ The notion of “in the presence of” is meant to express this.⁸⁷

Second reflection therefore appears to be somewhat different from Kierkegaard’s subjective reflection. By subjective reflection the existing subject relates some objective truth acquired through first reflection or objective thought to his

80 *Mystère de l’Être* I, p. 139 / *Mystery of Being* I, p. 123.

81 *Mystère de l’Être* I, p. 142 / *Mystery of Being* I, p. 126 (which translates “to ingather oneself in the presence of”).

82 *Positions et approches concrètes*, p. 63 / *Philosophy of Existence*, p. 12. *Philosophy of Existence* translates “re-collect myself as a unity.”

83 *Être et Avoir*, p. 194 / *Being and Having*, p. 169.

84 *Être et Avoir*, p. 124 / *Being and Having*, p. 109.

85 *Mystère de l’Être* I, p. 160 / *Mystery of Being* I, p. 81 (translation modified).

86 *Mystère de l’Être* I, p. 144 / *Mystery of Being* I, p. 128.

87 Recollection of course is also often called presence by Marcel, a “presence of my body to me” (*Philosophie concrète*, p. 30 / *Creative Fidelity*, p. 17) or “my psycho-organic presence to myself” (*Philosophie concrète*, p. 36 / *Creative Fidelity*, p. 20) for example, but to distinguish presence from recollection as I do may help understanding the different aspects involved in second reflection.

own existence or subjectivity.⁸⁸ It is just appropriating objective thought in order to become lived by the subject. Marcellian second reflection is different in that it establishes a way of thinking completely distinct from objective thought.⁸⁹ It does not relate objective truth to existence, it is not a subjective appropriation of the problematic; it is thinking in terms of the mysterious *instead* of the problematic.

C Communication of Existence

There is another important difference between Kierkegaard and Marcel. As I said, Marcellian second reflection is based on a non-reflecting experience not only of oneself but also of all that is different from oneself. Now, with the non-reflecting experience a particular *communication* with the world is established, as Marcel sometimes calls it. He conceives it as a communication of *being*, as a communication of my being to other being. I will argue that it is to be interpreted as a communication of existence, but in a way somewhat different from Kierkegaard's understanding of communication of existence.

We need first to have a look at the notion of being in Marcel's philosophy. Realizing a *co-esse* between me and what is before me makes me open to what is before me, or *disposable* as Marcel also calls it. This disposability ("*disponibilité*") allows us to recognise the givenness of something Marcel describes as inexhaustible and concrete ("*un inépuisable concret*").⁹⁰ He calls it being.⁹¹ Being is not the same as existence. It is something an existing subject experiences as a requirement ("*exigence*"), as a call,⁹² a call to give room to the experience of being. And it is a call because the presence of being is experienced as accomplishment or fullness, as something that appeases a profound appetite ("*un besoin profond*") within us,⁹³ the appetite or need for fullness ("*besoin de plénitude*").⁹⁴ The existing subject feels interiorly driven to being ("*une poussée intérieure*").⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Cf. SKS 7, 77 / CUPH, 65.

⁸⁹ With "first reflection" Kierkegaard and Marcel mean the same.

⁹⁰ *Philosophie concrète*, p. 104 / *Creative Fidelity*, p. 66.

⁹¹ *Philosophie concrète*, p. 109 / *Creative Fidelity*, p. 69. Being belongs to the realm of the invisible (*Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 31 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 29).

⁹² *Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 39 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 37 (cf. *Philosophie concrète*, p. 106 / *Creative Fidelity*, p. 67).

⁹³ *Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 47 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 45.

⁹⁴ *Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 44 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 42.

Everything can disclose being. Being is not identical to God in Marcel as some have interpreted it.⁹⁶ Being in relationship to things has to do with their singularity. I can analyse the common characteristics a flower shares with other flowers, and that would be first reflection; but I can also contemplate a flower in its singularity and in such a way get into contact with its being.⁹⁷ However this is for Marcel a secondary kind of disclosure of being. To things we attribute being only relatively to ourselves as existing subjects.⁹⁸ Besides openness to the being of things there is also openness to my own being and openness to the being of others. And, for Marcel, being is primarily experienced in self-awareness and in the awareness of others, of other persons.

Our own being may be called our soul, as Marcel suggests in *The Mystery of Being*. There is an interval between me and my soul.⁹⁹ There is something within me which is my soul and to which I can more or less come into contact with by recollection, by participation. And there is openness to the being of the other or the other person, when the other appears to me not as a “He” but as a “Thou,” as Marcel formulates it. “He” and “Thou” are two different ways of being related to others. If the other appears to me as a “He,” he is the object of first reflection, he is just an object among others; if he appears to me as a “Thou,” he becomes a presence that presupposes the disposability of the existing subject: “The other,

95 *Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 39 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 37 (cf. *Journal Métaphysique*, p. 181 / *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 183: “an appetite for being”). There is room for deepening the comparison with Kierkegaard here. I would suggest that what is subjective truth for Kierkegaard in some way is being for Marcel. For Kierkegaard, existence is a constant striving toward the maximum of subjective truth which is infinite passion for eternal happiness (compare to Marcel’s fullness). Instead of existence as a passionate striving, for Marcel the relationship to being is a relationship of hope (would Marcel call Kierkegaard’s striving “desire” as opposed to hope? Cf. *Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 156–160 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 155–159; *Homo Viator: Prolégomènes à une métaphysique de l'espérance*, Paris: Aubier 1944, p. 84 / *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. by Emma Craufurd, Chicago: H. Regnery Co. 1951, p. 66). But as Marcellian hope is not turned toward objects, as it “transcends” objects (*Homo Viator*, p. 41 / p. 32), Kierkegaardian striving is turned toward eternal happiness as the infinite, i.e. as something beyond any finite object; and as for Marcel hope is independent of any (objective) reasons to hope (*Homo Viator*, p. 83 / p. 65), for Kierkegaard subjective truth is beyond any possibility of being grasped objectively.

96 See Anthony Malagon or Thomas C. Anderson (cf. supra, footnote 2 & 3).

97 *Mystère de l'Être* II, pp. 16f. / *Mystery of Being* II, pp. 12f.

98 We attribute it to things, says Marcel, because as existing subjects we apprehend them as being of value to us (*Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 58 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 57). Being cannot be separated from the notion of value (*Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 62 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 61).

99 *Être et Avoir*, p. 45 / *Being and Having*, p. 44 (cf. *Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 33 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 31).

in so far as he is other, only exists for me in so far as I am open to him, in so far as he is a Thou.”¹⁰⁰

For Marcel, there is no presence to the other independently of a presence to oneself. And the other way round: there is no presence to oneself without being in touch with others: “I communicate effectively with myself only insofar as I communicate with the other person, i.e. when he becomes Thou for me.”¹⁰¹ Marcel uses the notion of communication in a broader sense than Kierkegaard, as it can also express a self-relationship. This interdependence between self-communication and communication with the other is also described in terms of being: There is no being in touch with the being of others without being in touch with one’s own being and vice versa. Inter-subjectivity is a “relationship from being to being.”¹⁰²

There is not only interdependence between self-communication and communication with the other, Marcel also conceives the communication between two individuals as reciprocal. “We must be Thou for each other” as he expresses it in the *Metaphysical Journal*,¹⁰³ we must “treat” each other as beings,¹⁰⁴ be attentive to each other’s being,¹⁰⁵ “treat” each other as singular beings, as he formulates it elsewhere.¹⁰⁶ When this happens there is “community,” as Marcel calls it in the *Metaphysical Journal*,¹⁰⁷ or communication with “communion” as he writes in *The Mystery of Being*.¹⁰⁸ There is communion or reciprocal participation.

This kind of reciprocal participation now can be called communication of existence. Let me explain why. What is the being of the other? It is his soul. What is his soul? It is not a static entity but being interiorly driven toward... being. And this being driven is constitutive of existence, of an existing subject. To exist means to be open or disposable, to live in the mode of participation.¹⁰⁹ To be open to the being of the other means to be open to his existence, to participate in his existence. Inter-subjectivity therefore is the reciprocal participation in the existence of each other, a reciprocal communication of existence. With

100 *Être et Avoir*, p. 133 / *Being and Having*, p. 116. Notice the proximity to Levinas again.

101 *Philosophie concrète*, p. 56 / *Creative Fidelity*, p. 38.

102 *Journal Métaphysique*, p. 171 / *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 172.

103 *Journal Métaphysique*, p. 199 / *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 202.

104 *Philosophie concrète*, p. 112 / *Creative Fidelity*, p. 71.

105 *Mystère de l'Être I*, p. 221 / *Mystery of Being I*, p. 205.

106 *Mystère de l'Être I*, p. 196 / *Mystery of Being I*, p. 180.

107 *Journal Métaphysique*, p. 199 / *Metaphysical Journal*, p. 202.

108 *Mystère de l'Être I*, p. 221 / *Mystery of Being I*, p. 205.

109 *Philosophie concrète*, p. 40 / *Creative Fidelity*, p. 23.

Marcel's words, it can also be described in the following way: "There is a real communication between my experience and the other experiences."¹¹⁰

Obviously for Marcel, communication of existence is something different from what Kierkegaard means by it. For Kierkegaard, it is the communication between an existing subject and a subject that has not yet become aware of its existing. Kierkegaardian communication of existence is about how to communicate one's own existing or being subjective to a subject that is not yet existing, i.e., that has not yet become subjective. It is a non-reciprocal relation from an individual with consciousness of existence to an individual lacking consciousness of existence. Marcel does not at all mention this possibility, although he could. It would make sense for him to consider communication of existence as a communication to somebody who has not become aware of himself as existing. But Marcel restricts communication of existence to the reciprocal relationship of existing subjects.

In Kierkegaardian terms, the advantage of Marcel's conception is the idea of an interdependence between being subjective and being in touch with other subjects' being subjective. Kierkegaardian subjectivity, in the *Postscript* and elsewhere, remains a somewhat isolated subjectivity. Even in *Works of Love* the description of love of the neighbour does not give emphasis to the idea of mutual relationship and even less to the more specific idea of an interdependence of my being subjective with the being subjective of others.¹¹¹ Ideally speaking Kierkegaard could have focussed on it, but in his time philosophical reflection on inter-subjectivity was not yet developed enough for such a focus. Marcel's interdependence does establish a kind of second person perspective. Marcel himself even calls his philosophy a metaphysics of the "we are" and opposes it to the Cartesian metaphysics of the "I think."¹¹² I am not sure Marcel's second reflection really grounds in a *we are*; perhaps it would be more precise to say that it grounds in an *I exist* participating in the *I exist* of another or others.

110 *Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 11 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 7.

111 Except some hints as in the following passage: "...but the beloved he loves *as himself* is not the neighbor; the beloved is the *other I*. Whether we speak of the *first I* or the *other I*, we do not come a step closer to the neighbor, because the neighbor is the *first you*" (SKS 9, 64 / WL, 57). I do not mean that Kierkegaard's understanding of love excludes reciprocal encounter. M. Jamie Ferreira has convincingly shown that a thorough reading of *Works of Love* "leaves room for and even requires significant dimensions of mutual responsiveness within a relationship" (M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving. A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love*, New York: Oxford University Press 2001, p. 210; see the whole chapter 15). Nevertheless, Kierkegaard does not reflect on love in such a way as to make of mutuality or interdependence of subjectivity an essential element of the love-relationship.

112 *Mystère de l'Être* II, p. 12 / *Mystery of Being* II, p. 9.

My comparison between Kierkegaard and Marcel was restricted to only one aspect of their philosophies: existence in relationship to communication of existence. I do not pretend to have reached a conclusive understanding of how both authors can be compared with respect to this aspect. There are questions unanswered and the comparison could be deepened. But with Malagon and against Anderson,¹¹³ my inquiry shows, I think, that despite the differences there is a common understanding of existence expressing a common understanding of an existential first person perspective.¹¹⁴

113 Cf. *supra*, footnote 2 & 3.

114 Many thanks to George Pattison for checking my article and to Kevin Smith for helping me to find some references in English translations of Marcel's writings not easily accessible in Germany.