

# *Non-Conceptual Knowledge in Jacques Maritain and Gabriel Marcel*

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Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) and Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) are two of the most significant Catholic philosophers of the twentieth-century. They are also both converts to the Catholic faith, each finding it more intellectually and religiously congenial to their respective philosophies of life than alternative systems of meaning. Yet the two French philosophers are usually not seen as intellectually sympathetic to each other, are not generally regarded as like-minded, and are seldom studied side by side by Catholic philosophers. One of the main reasons for this is the fact that Maritain is a Thomist philosopher, and Marcel is a Christian existentialist philosopher.

It is true that Maritain occasionally calls himself an existentialist, even sometimes describes his metaphysics as “existentialist,” and yet he does not use the term in the same way Marcel would use it. Maritain employs the word “existentialist” to focus on the notion of *existence* in all its manifestations, and, through this, on being, which is the proper and central subject of metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> For Marcel, on the other hand, the term “existentialist” refers to the view that philosophical

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<sup>1</sup>See Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent: An Essay on Christian Existentialism*, trans. Lewis Galantieri and Gerald B. Phelan (Garden City, New York: Image, 1956), pp. 11ff.

enquiry must properly begin with the concrete lived experience of the individual subject in his or her concrete situation in existence. This starting point will turn out to have important implications for human knowledge and meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, I think it is fair to say that it is this issue of the significance of human subjectivity for philosophical enquiry that has been largely responsible for the discrete distance the two philosophers maintained from each other throughout their own lifetimes. Maritain believed that the emphasis Marcel placed on human subjectivity and on existentialist philosophy in general led inevitably to an irresponsible neglect of the proper subject matter of metaphysics, *being* as such. Marcel, on the other hand, and existentialist philosophers in general, were motivated, at least in part, by the belief that traditional metaphysics had led to the predominance of abstract systems of philosophy, systems which were in danger of losing touch with, and rendering even more inaccessible, the philosophical issues they were supposed to illuminate. (Although this was a criticism the existentialists aimed primarily at Cartesianism, more than at other philosophical systems.)

Throughout the period Maritain and Marcel were contemporaries, during which time they often met and discussed philosophical issues, there was a general distrust of existentialism by Thomists and a corresponding distrust of traditional philosophy by existentialists.<sup>3</sup> This mutual distrust was another reason which prevented these philosophers

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<sup>2</sup>Of course, the existentialists differed among themselves over the meaning of the term. Marcel clearly disagrees with Sartre. In his well known essay "Existentialism is a Humanism", Sartre defines existentialists (in whose number he explicitly includes Marcel) as holding that "existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be the starting point." [J.P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. by H. Barnes (New York: Citadel, 1990 ed.), p. 13.]. However, Sartre is mistaken in thinking that these alternatives are the same, for Marcel accepts that subjectivity must be the starting point for philosophical enquiry but he does *not* accept that existence precedes essence. [See Marcel's "Reply to John D. Glenn, Jr" in P.A. Schilpp and L.E. Hahn (eds.), *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1984), p. 552]. For Marcel's critical essay on the philosophy of Sartre, see his *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. M. Harari (New York: Citadel, 1991 ed.), pp. 47–89.

<sup>3</sup>In his "Autobiographical Essay" in P.A. Schilpp and L.E. Hahn (eds.), *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, Marcel says, ". . . Charles Du Bos and I had weekly meetings with Jacques Maritain, who took great pains to help us understand Thomist thought better and to appreciate it more. All three of us showed good will, but the result was meager indeed." (p. 30). See also H. Stuart Hughes, "Marcel, Maritain and the Secular World," *The American Scholar*, Autumn 1966, pp. 728–749, especially p. 746.

from focusing in their own lifetimes on what they had in *common* rather than on what separated them. For Maritain and Marcel share several key philosophical meeting points, and now, in retrospect, I believe these meeting points are much more significant than the issues over which they differed.

One obvious difference between Marcel and Maritain—obvious to anybody who takes even a passing glance at their respective works—is their style of philosophizing. Seldom have two styles been more opposed. Where Marcel is unsystematic, cursory, and often cryptic, Maritain is systematic, focused, exhaustive in detail, and generally quite clear. Whereas Maritain has a clear project in mind and does all in his power to realize that project, Marcel is suspicious of system-building in philosophy and prefers instead to offer fragmentary and often scattered points aimed not very clearly at a more distant philosophical endpoint. Marcel, of course, wishes to make a philosophical point by adopting his particular style of philosophizing; and, in a sense, one might say that this is true of Maritain also. Nevertheless, I draw attention to their differences in style here simply to emphasize that we should not let such differences become a barrier to our recognition of the many similar themes and concerns to be found in their respective works.

The points of *similarity* between Maritain and Marcel are many and very deep. The most important are: a) a dissatisfaction with the philosophies of Cartesianism, idealism and empiricism, and a determination to offer a realist alternative to them; b) the key role each allows for non-conceptual knowledge in their work; c) their recognition of the importance of art and other creative works for illuminating philosophical truths; and d) their similar concern with the structure and development of modern society—culturally, socially, and politically. The crucial *difference* between them, which kept them apart in their own lifetimes, was the respective roles they each assigned to conceptual knowledge in their thought.

My focus in the rest of this chapter will be on the second issue mentioned above, the nature and importance of *non-conceptual knowledge* in the respective philosophies of Maritain and Marcel. This, it seems to me, is the most significant point of agreement between the two philosophers. And the fact that each philosopher attached great significance to pre-conceptual knowledge is a further indication of a deeper affinity between them, an affinity which neither of them was quite prepared to acknowledge in his own lifetime. In the next two sections I will

provide a brief exposition of the nature of non-conceptual knowledge in the work of each philosopher, and also briefly discuss the role non-conceptual knowledge plays in the overall philosophical position of each. In the third section, I will briefly compare and contrast the main points of agreement and disagreement which have emerged from our analysis of the work of both thinkers, and also suggest a way both philosophers might respond to a contemporary objection often made concerning the possibility of non-conceptual knowledge in human experience.

## I

Although Maritain's principal aim is the development of an adequate and complete metaphysics, which would serve as both an alternative to, and as a critique of, Cartesianism and empiricism, he recognises that an adequate epistemology is a necessary and integral part of this task. Maritain's major work in epistemology is *The Degrees of Knowledge*, and, as the title indicates, his aim is to identify and describe the different types of knowledge in human experience. In the book as a whole he distinguishes two realms of knowledge, natural and supernatural (suprarational) knowledge. Natural knowledge pertains to the things of the natural world, which are known in a variety of ways, whereas supernatural knowledge pertains to the realm of the supernatural. Within the realm of natural knowledge, Maritain further distinguishes three main kinds of knowing—the scientific, the philosophical, and the connatural—of which the third will be our main concern here.

The key datum for Maritain in all three types of knowledge is the chief insight of his whole metaphysics: the realization that the human mind in all genuine knowledge *conforms to the object*. Truth emerges for Maritain in natural knowledge when the mind lies in "conformity to *what is* outside of it and independent of it."<sup>4</sup> The object dictates the way in which it shall be known; according to Maritain the object is master and the intellect is at once passive in the face of it (it does not modify the object), and yet active too in coming to receive or have *knowledge* of the object. Yet scientific and philosophical knowledge differ fundamentally from connatural

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<sup>4</sup>Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), p. 12.

knowledge. This is because the former types of knowledge occur by means of and require the employment of *concepts*, whereas connatural knowledge is *pre-conceptual*. According to Maritain, in scientific and philosophical knowledge, the concept is a *formal sign*, which means that the concept itself is not what is grasped by the mind in knowledge; rather the object is grasped or made known *by means of the concept*. Concepts, therefore, are not the objects of thought, but that by which we come to know the objects of thought. Knowledge in either of these forms issues in explicit and basically accurate judgments, judgments which can then form the basis of further reasoning and argumentation. Further, scientific and philosophical knowledge arise mainly through observation, empirical evidence, experience, etc., and by means of deductive and inductive reasoning from the evidence.

In contrast to these two types of natural knowledge, Maritain places knowledge by connaturality, which is discussed briefly in *The Degrees of Knowledge*, and in a little more detail in *The Range of Reason*.<sup>5</sup> According to Maritain, connaturality is “a kind of knowledge which is produced in the intellect but not by virtue of conceptual connections and by way of demonstration.” This negative definition is about as close as Maritain comes to providing a philosophical description of the nature of knowledge by connaturality. This is not surprising, however, given that such knowledge is non-conceptual. It may be possible to give some account of connatural knowledge by means of concepts (i.e., it may be possible to approach a *theoretical* analysis of that which is essentially non-theoretical). This is what Maritain, the philosopher, is attempting in his philosophical work. However, since this kind of knowledge is essentially non-conceptual, one should not expect a precise conceptual account of its nature.

Maritain, of course, is not the first philosopher to draw attention to the presence of this kind of knowledge in human experience. He himself believes that this kind of knowledge has a long history in human thought, and he suggests that Aristotle makes appeal to it in the *Ethics* in his discussion of the virtuous man. The virtuous man is “co-natured” with virtue, and therefore behaves virtuously. Something very similar to connaturality, although obviously expressed in different terminology, can also be found in St. Thomas Aquinas, in some Indian

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<sup>5</sup>Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), pp. 280–283; and *The Range of Reason*, pp. 3–29.

philosophers, and in the work of more recent philosophers such as William James, Henri Bergson, Martin Buber and Marcel, to name only a few.<sup>6</sup>

By the term “connatural knowledge,” Maritain refers to knowledge which occurs when the individual subject becomes “co-natured” with the object of knowledge. In such knowledge the intellect does not operate alone or primarily by means of concepts, but operates also with “the affective inclinations and the dispositions of the will, and is guided and directed by them.”<sup>7</sup> So strictly speaking, connatural knowledge is not *rational* knowledge, i.e., it is not knowledge arrived at *by means of concepts alone*. Nevertheless, it is a real and genuine knowledge, even if a little obscure; certainly it resists the attempt to make it fully accessible in conceptual terms. Despite the difficulty in bringing precision to our *philosophical understanding* of the nature of connatural knowledge, such knowledge, according to Maritain, plays an important, and indeed indispensable, role in human experience. It is to be found in particular in “that knowing of the singular [the concrete] which comes about in everyday life and in our relationship person to person.”<sup>8</sup> Connatural knowledge is particularly important in the areas of morality, art, and mystical experience. To illustrate the notion further, Maritain focuses on an example taken from moral experience.

Moral experience offers the most widespread instance of knowledge through connaturality. This is due to the central significance of morality in human experience. Moral knowledge, according to Maritain, is gained in an *experiential* way for most people, and such experiential knowledge is nearly always adequate for the regulation of one’s moral behavior. In short, moral knowledge is usually knowledge by connaturality. The individual usually has a non-conceptual insight, or realization, of how a particular virtue, for example, is to be understood and applied in human experience. Yet the individual may not be able to, and usually cannot, articulate this knowledge, nor provide a conceptual account of it.

An example Maritain discusses is the virtue, *fortitude*. On the one hand we may possess in our minds conceptual and rational knowledge of this virtue: knowing how to explain and describe it; how it is

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<sup>6</sup>Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22, and Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, pp. 280–283.

<sup>8</sup>Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, p. 23.

to be applied in experience; which experiences display it, require it, lack it; etc. In this case, our intellect would be in conformity with various truths which pertain to this particular virtue.<sup>9</sup> We would be in a position to answer any question about fortitude by simply identifying the appropriate truth involved. In this way, a moral philosopher could know a great deal about virtue, but still not be virtuous. Conversely, we may know none of these truths conceptually, yet we may “possess the virtue in question in our own powers of will and desire, have it embodied in ourselves, and thus be in accordance with it, or co-natured with it, in our very being.”<sup>10</sup> In this second case the individual possesses the virtue, and when asked a question about it, will answer it through inclination, or through the will, by consulting his or her own being, by consulting what he or she is. A virtuous person may therefore be totally ignorant of moral philosophy. This example illustrates clearly the distinction between knowledge of fortitude by connaturality and knowledge of the same virtue through concepts. In the former case we experience, possess in our being, what the virtue is, whereas in the latter case we do not possess experiential knowledge of fortitude, but we do have an abstract, theoretical understanding of the virtue.

The analysis of moral knowledge as connatural knowledge is also used by Maritain to discuss and elaborate on the nature of natural moral law. The natural law is known by all in a pre-conceptual, non-rational, non-cognitive, and non-propositional way. Natural law is not natural simply because it expresses the normality of functioning of human nature, but also because it is *naturally known*.<sup>11</sup> Natural law is then made explicit in conceptual judgments, but these judgments proceed, not from prior conceptual knowledge, but from “that *connaturality or congeniality* through which what is consonant with the essential inclinations of human nature is grasped by the intellect as good; what is dissonant, as bad.”<sup>12</sup> It is important to realize that the word “inclinations” does not merely refer to animal-like inclinations (although these are also possessed by humans), i.e., to biological impulses of one sort or another. Rather, the word is intended to convey what is *essentially human*. These inclinations are,

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

according to Maritain, *reason-permeated* inclinations; they are inclinations refracted through the crystal of reason in its unconscious or pre-conscious life.<sup>13</sup> Maritain's point is that human beings have a pre-conscious, but reason-permeated, connatural knowledge of moral experience, which is known to all, and which is progressively revealed in the conceptual development of the natural law.

Maritain makes a further relevant and important point about the natural law. Since the fundamental principles of morality are known by inclination, or by connaturality, they are known in an *undemonstrable* manner. This is why human beings are unable to fully justify *in conceptual terms* their most fundamental and cherished moral beliefs. This fact is a further indication of their essential naturalness. In this sense moral philosophy is truly a *reflective* knowledge. It does not create or discover the natural law; all it does is critically analyze and rationally elucidate moral standards and rules of conduct whose validity was previously discovered in a non-conceptual and non-rational way.<sup>14</sup>

Analogous to Maritain's explanation of our "connatural knowledge" of morality is his account of connatural knowledge of art and of connatural knowledge of God in mystical experience.<sup>15</sup> The artist and the poet have their own special way of knowing the world, which is clearly neither philosophical nor scientific, i.e., it is non-conceptual. Art does not generally communicate on the level of the conceptual, and this is true even of literature or poetry. Art is rather a type of experience not only for the artist but also for the audience. Poetic experience too, Maritain holds, is born in the pre-conscious life of the intellect, and is essentially an obscure revelation both of the subjectivity of the poet and of some flash of reality coming together out of sleep in one single awakening.<sup>16</sup> Art also very often *communicates* to the spectator in a *non-conceptual* way. Mystical experience, however, is the highest form of knowledge by connaturality because its object is God, and also because, unlike art which gives us only indirect knowledge of God, mystical experience issues in *direct* knowledge of God.

It is important to consider briefly the relationship between connatural knowledge and conceptual knowledge in Maritain's thought.

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<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 24–26.



One question to consider is whether or not connatural knowledge is a kind of foreknowledge of the principles which later emerge in abstract metaphysics? In other words, is the intuition of being, which is central to Maritain's metaphysical system, a type of connatural knowledge? This is a crucial question and reflection on it will help us clarify further the notion of connaturality in Maritain's thought. Maritain emphatically rejects the idea that the principles of metaphysics might be principles which are initially known in connatural knowledge, and which then become explicit in the intellectual knowledge typical of abstract metaphysics.<sup>17</sup>

The first point Maritain makes is that the critique of knowledge—i.e., the philosophical investigation of the origin, nature and types of knowledge—is part of metaphysics. This is also true of the investigation of knowledge by connaturality; its recognition and analysis belong to metaphysics. However, he further holds that connatural knowledge has nothing to do with metaphysics itself. This is because metaphysics proceeds purely by way of conceptual and rational knowledge, while connaturality proceeds in an essentially non-conceptual and non-rational way. So Maritain's position is that while the actual knowledge one gains by connaturality (e.g. of fortitude) has nothing to do with metaphysics (because it is non-conceptual), the identification and analysis of *the nature of connaturality itself* as a type of knowing does belong to metaphysics. The identification and analysis belong to metaphysics at least to the extent that one can give a partial, though always inadequate, philosophical account of this type of knowledge.

Maritain further points out that metaphysics requires the intuition of being, and that the intuition of being is *not* a kind of connatural knowledge. Rather, the intuition of being is an intellectual intuition; insofar as it is an intellectual intuition, it is *objective*—which means that it can be known and expressed *conceptually*. The intuition of being is not, therefore, a “co-naturing” with any object, a co-naturing which could only be hinted at, but not fully captured, in conceptual knowledge. Maritain further adds that it is very important not to confuse the two types of knowledge, for any attempt to make connatural knowledge a type of philosophical knowledge (i.e., a type of conceptual knowledge), and similarly any attempt to express those principles

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

proper to philosophical knowledge in terms of connaturality, will have the effect of spoiling both types of knowledge and their objects.<sup>18</sup> So Maritain is careful to keep the two types of knowledge—philosophical and connatural—clearly distinct, while at the same time maintaining that the task of the identification and elucidation of connaturality as a way of knowing belongs to philosophy.

## II

Gabriel Marcel is also very concerned in his work with the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual knowledge, or to use Marcel's special terms, with the distinction between primary reflection and secondary reflection, and with the corresponding realms of problem and mystery. In fact, the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual knowledge forms the basis for Marcel's Christian existentialist account of the human person. One of Marcel's primary aims is to explore the role and limits of conceptual or abstract knowledge in human life. He is concerned with this issue because he holds that conceptual knowledge is unable to give an adequate account of what he calls the "being-in-a-situation," or what I call the "situated involvement", of the subject in his or her world.

According to Marcel, the subject is fundamentally an *embodied being-in-a-situation*, and is not solely a thinking or knowing subject.<sup>19</sup> The subject is always located in a *specific context* by virtue of its particular embodied situation in the world. This *embodied situation* is defined by the subject's particular spatial and temporal location, general and personal history, cultural and economic context, etc.<sup>20</sup> This realm is ontologically basic; it is the realm where the subject's experiences take place at the level of existential contact, not at the level of abstraction. In short, the various experiences of the individual subject *are what they are* because of the subject's involvement in a *particular concrete situation*. The (conceptual) meanings of the subject's experiences at the basic level of being-in-a-situation can later, and then only partially and with great difficulty, be abstracted by the

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup>Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. I, trans. by G. S. Fraser (Chicago: Regnery, 1951), pp. 154–181.

intellect and presented as “objects” of knowledge available for all to consider. However, this basic level of being-in-a-situation, Marcel holds, is not *fully* accessible to conceptual or theoretical thinking, nor are the higher levels of being,<sup>21</sup> of moral experience, human relationships, the subject’s relationship to God, and other profound human experiences. This is a crucial point because one of the great abuses of modern thought has been its tendency to try to objectify all human experience in concepts, and failing this, to judge that any experience which cannot be so objectified is not worthy of serious philosophical consideration. Marcel wishes to challenge and correct this contemporary dogma and in so doing to preserve and defend the integrity and dignity of the human person.

Marcel’s initial characterization of reflection is especially significant. He situates it as occurring *after* our *pre-reflective* lived experience. According to him, reflection is “nothing other than attention”<sup>22</sup> to our pre-reflective lived experiences, which are habitual and primary. However, it is possible to distinguish between primary and secondary reflection. According to Marcel, “we can say that where primary reflection tends to dissolve the unity of experience which is first put before it, the function of secondary reflection is essentially recuperative; it restores that unity.”<sup>23</sup> Primary reflection then is “ordinary” reflection which relies upon, as an essential aspect of its operation, conceptual generalizations and the use of abstract thinking. This is the kind of reflection which seeks functional connections and which is operative in the sciences, mathematics, and “theoretical thinking” of any kind. It involves a “standing back” from, or *abstraction* from, our fundamental involvement with things, and engages in an enquiry which proceeds by means of *disinterested* concepts, which have shareable, public, and, therefore, universal content.

This type of reflection typically deals with *problems* of various kinds. Problems of any kind, according to Marcel, require a solution which is available for *everybody*.<sup>24</sup> This in fact is what is meant by a

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<sup>21</sup>S. Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence* (London: Unwin, 1990), p. 12.

<sup>22</sup>The “levels” of Being which can be distinguished in Marcel’s thought are identified in E. L. Strauss and M. Machado’s, “Gabriel Marcel’s Notion of Incarnate Being” in P. A. Schilpp and L. E. Hahn, eds., *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1984), p. 129.

<sup>23</sup>Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (Vol I), p. 78.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 83.

“problem.” A problem presupposes a community of enquiry in which the problem can be publicly formulated, discussed and, hopefully, solved. But features of experience can only be presented as “problems” for the mind if the individual first *abstracts from* the “situated involvement” which defines the lived experience of the enquirer, and these features can only be maintained and discussed as problems if everyone involved in their appraisal does likewise. Suppose, for example, that a person is watching TV when the TV set suddenly stops working. In this instance, the individual will “abstract” from his or her “situated involvement” of watching TV and focus on the problem, i.e., on the broken TV set itself. Perhaps the individual will notice that the electrical connection is damaged, and will set about repairing it. This problem, however, is one which could, in principle, be identified and solved by *any* person. Primary reflection is, therefore, the means by which it is possible for the community of human beings to collectively formulate and discuss problems, and to attempt to arrive at solutions to them. Characterized in this way, primary reflection is obviously a very important feature of the ontological structure of human beings, a fact which Marcel does not wish to deny.

One of Marcel’s most significant claims, however, is that primary reflection, understood in his sense, cannot give an adequate account of the actual “situated involvement” of the individual in his or her particular situation in the world, nor should it be required to. This is because the individual subject’s personal experience, in his or her unique situation in existence, cannot be fully captured in concepts, which, after all, are supposed to be *disinterested* and have sharable, public content. Indeed, the process of abstraction requires that we set aside and ignore what is *personal* in our experiences. Marcel points out that a strong tendency of the mental activity characterized as primary reflection is to sever permanently the human subject itself from the immediacy and unity of its experiences, so that the subject too is now treated as an object and therefore becomes an object among objects.<sup>25</sup> This tendency, for him, is evident in modern thought, particularly in modern scientific thought and in modern bureaucracies; consequently it is prominent in much of modern life. Yet primary reflection, according to Marcel, cannot deal adequately with the human subject

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<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 4ff.

because many of the subject's most profound experiences simply will not submit to the categories and specifications peculiar to primary reflection. In short, Marcel argues that there can be no "scientific" or "theoretical" account of human life *in its fullness*. This fundamental involvement of human beings in the world is often called by Marcel a *mystery*, not because it is unknowable but because it *cannot* be fully captured in functional concepts (that is, in primary reflection).

The realm of mystery, for Marcel, is a realm where the distinction between subject and object breaks down: "A mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between subject and object, between what is in me and what is before me, loses its meaning and its initial validity."<sup>26</sup> The most basic level of human existence, being-in-a-situation, or situated involvement, is the level at which the subject is immersed in a context, a level where the subject does not experience "objects" (in the abstract sense of "object"). This realm of human existence is best described as "mysterious," from the philosophical point of view, because it cannot be fully captured and presented in concepts. It is even difficult to reveal or evoke in phenomenological descriptions. Some of the other "mysteries" of Being, according to Marcel, are our experience of our own embodiment, the unity of body and mind, the nature of sensation, and the higher levels of Being: the "concrete approaches" of love, hope, fidelity and faith. These experiences are all *mysterious* because they intimately and essentially *involve the questioner* in such a way that the meaning of the experience cannot be *fully* conveyed by means of abstract conceptual thinking, i.e., by cutting the individual subject off from the experience.

If the realm of mystery is non-conceptual, how is it known? It is at this point that Marcel introduces the notion of *secondary reflection*, or of non-conceptual knowledge. He argues that it is by secondary reflection that access to the realm of mystery is gained. What is common to the above mentioned experiences, including the experience of embodiment, is that they resist being made wholly objective to the mind and cannot be fully captured in concepts. They cannot retain their identity and character apart from the individual(s) involved. According to Marcel, secondary reflection helps us to *recover* these experiences.

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 22–47.

Yet he also describes it as a “second reflection” on primary reflection.<sup>27</sup> That is, he indicates that secondary reflection is both the *act* of critical reflection on primary reflection *and* the *process* of recovery of the “mysteries of being.”

Therefore, secondary reflection, it seems to me, is best characterized in the following way: secondary reflection begins as a) the *act* of critical reflection (a “second” reflection) on ordinary conceptual thinking (primary reflection). This “second,” or critical, reflection enables the philosopher to discover that the categories of primary reflection are not adequate to provide a true account of the nature of the self or of the self’s most profound experiences. Here secondary reflection involves ordinary reflection but with the crucial difference that, unlike ordinary reflection, it is a critical reflection directed at *the nature of thought itself*.<sup>28</sup> The act of secondary reflection then b) culminates in a *realization*, a *discovery*, or an *assurance* of the realm of mystery, and motivates human actions appropriate to this realm. This discovery is a kind of intuitive grasp or experiential insight into various experiences which are non-conceptual and which conceptual knowledge can never *fully* express. “Secondary reflection” is a general term which refers to both *the act* of critical reflection on primary reflection and the *realization* or *assurance* of the realm of mystery, which lies beyond primary reflection. Since secondary reflection has this dual meaning, it is easy to understand why the term has often been misleading, a point which Marcel himself has recognized.<sup>29</sup>

Marcel gives many examples throughout his work, several of which we have already mentioned. One of the most interesting concerns the experience of fidelity. Marcel illustrates that a complete and precise conceptual analysis of the meaning of the experience of fidelity is not possible. However, one can *recognize* and appreciate the experience quite easily when one is in the presence of fidelity. Marcel argues that when one reflects philosophically on the meaning of the experience of fidelity one is led to two insights: first, that the meaning of the experience eludes conceptual analysis, and secondly, that nevertheless

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<sup>27</sup>Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. K. Farrer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), p. 117.

<sup>28</sup>Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. by R. Rosthall (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1964), p. 22.

<sup>29</sup>Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, p. 22. See also Clyde Pax, “Philosophical Reflection: Gabriel Marcel,” *The New Scholasticism*, Vol. XXXVIII, (1964), p. 170.

one can be assured of its meaning in experience or at the level of existential contact. This example nicely illustrates the dual movement of secondary reflection. The meaning of fidelity can be partially known in conceptual knowledge, yet in the end it exhausts and eludes conceptual knowledge and must ultimately be experienced to be fully “known”, for it is fundamentally non-conceptual. Marcel provides a similar analysis of those other areas of experience which resist conceptual explanation, such as the experience of embodiment, the unity of body and mind, and the “concrete approaches” of faith, hope, and love.<sup>30</sup>

This new dimension to which secondary reflection allows us access is what Marcel refers to as the realm of *Being*, or of the unity of experience. This realm, as we have seen, cannot be deduced in the logical sense from the structure of thought,<sup>31</sup> and, as Marcel points out, this realm is itself the *guide* (the “intuition”) of reflective thought.<sup>32</sup> So, like Maritain, Marcel agrees that conceptual knowledge is a vital aspect of experience, but as philosophers we must identify its place and its limits. We must also be aware of the possibility of non-conceptual knowledge, and he agrees with Maritain that the identification and elucidation of this realm belongs to philosophy.

### III

It is obvious that the realm of non-conceptual knowledge not only plays a very important role in the respective philosophies of Maritain and Marcel, but also that their respective explications converge at many points. For Maritain, non-conceptual knowledge, or connaturality, is one of the main routes by which we gain knowledge of morality, art, and the deepest human relationships. It is also a way in which one can express one’s relationship with God. Marcel too believes that some of the deepest human experiences, such as human relationships, including their moral dimension (as manifested in the

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<sup>30</sup>See “Conversation 2” between Marcel and Paul Ricoeur in Marcel’s *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. by S. Jolin and P. McCormack (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 223–229.

<sup>31</sup>For a good summary of Marcel’s account of fidelity, see *Creative Fidelity*, Ch. VIII.

<sup>32</sup>Kenneth Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975 edition), p. 83. See also Gabriel Marcel, *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 68.

concrete approaches of fidelity, hope and love), as well as our relationship with God, are all essentially non-conceptual. He even suggests that the absolute and unconditional commitment which is the defining feature of the most profound human relationships must be ultimately grounded in the Absolute Thou, that is, in the existence of God.<sup>33</sup>

Maritain allows for more conceptual labor in moral philosophy than Marcel would be happy with; however, both philosophers accept some version of the theory of natural law, although Marcel does not use the term. But Marcel clearly accepts that there are important and profound human experiences which are objective to all, and which, to use Maritain's phrase, are *naturally known*. They may also be said to be *reason-permeated* (to use another phrase of Maritain's) in the sense that they are rational and can be made philosophically explicit, at least to some degree. Like Maritain, Marcel also recognizes that artistic expression, especially in drama and music, helps us to convey some features of those crucial human experiences which are not fully accessible to conceptual knowledge. So both philosophers agree that any adequate epistemology must take account of non-conceptual knowledge because such knowledge plays a crucial role in human experience.

The strongest disagreement between the two thinkers arises, I believe, over the notions of existence and Being.<sup>34</sup> In fact, more generally, disagreement over the understanding of these two notions defines to a large extent the fundamental difference between Thomism and existentialism. For Thomists, the concept of existence is applied to whatever exists, and Thomistic philosophers focus on what exists precisely in so far as it exists or is actual. But for the existentialists, the concept of existence refers primarily to *human* existence (although the existentialists differed individually over the correct account of human existence). Moreover, the term "being," for Maritain, refers to the object of knowledge which is initially known in an intellectual intuition and which is later made explicit in metaphysical reflection. For Marcel, on the other hand, "Being" refers to all of those areas of experience which are inaccessible to conceptual knowledge and which must be approached *non-conceptually*, by means of secondary reflection, and which can be lost if they become the exclusive focus of conceptual knowledge. It is important to emphasize that the term

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<sup>33</sup>Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. I, p. 38.

<sup>34</sup>Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, p. 166.



“Being” has this different meaning, or different application, in the thought of each philosopher, for once we realize that Maritain and Marcel are not talking about the same issue, we begin to suspect that their disagreement is not perhaps as great as it might initially appear.

The differences between Maritain and Marcel have their roots in the issue over which both philosophers disagreed most sharply, and which ultimately divided them in their own lifetimes. This is the issue of the right approach to, and the correct subject matter of, philosophy. Marcel, the existentialist, regarded abstract metaphysics with suspicion because in his view it was too speculative, was divorced from experience, and relied too heavily on conceptual knowledge. Maritain, the Thomist, looked on existentialism with suspicion and saw it as relativizing the key notions of being and existence to human experience and of irresponsibly downplaying or ignoring reason and conceptual knowledge in favor of individual subjectivity and freedom. Yet even on this issue, I suggest that neither philosopher is committed to the view that the other position is untenable.<sup>35</sup> There is room for some accommodation by each philosopher, at least for the concerns of the other.

While Maritain believes that conceptual knowledge is essential to attain knowledge of being, and therefore of all reality, still, like Marcel, he emphasizes the role of experience in philosophy and even in metaphysics. He often reminds us that reality overflows concepts, and that metaphysics itself initially requires an experience of being, or of the fact that the world is there.<sup>36</sup> It is not stretching the matter too much to suggest that, like Marcel, he would also agree that there is an irreducible quality about this experience, and that it is only open to minds disposed to receive it. Marcel, on the other hand, clearly does not wish to deny the objectivity of knowledge nor to denigrate the importance of conceptual knowledge in human experience.<sup>37</sup> He explicitly agrees with Maritain that “thought is made for being as the eye is made for light.”<sup>38</sup> But while the objectivity of knowledge

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<sup>35</sup>Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, p. 9. See also James Collins, *The Existentialists* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952), pp. 143ff.

<sup>36</sup>For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Leo Sweeney, “Existentialism: Authentic and Unauthentic,” *The New Scholasticism*, Vol. XL, (1956), pp. 36–61.

<sup>37</sup>Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Mentor, 1962), pp. 9–19.

<sup>38</sup>For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see my “Gabriel Marcel and the Problem of Knowledge,” forthcoming in the *Bulletin de la Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française*.

is maintained precisely in the move to abstraction, Marcel is keen to define both the role and the limits of conceptual knowledge in human experience. Maritain, on the other hand, holds that an adequate conceptual analysis of what it means to exist in general is essential in metaphysics and epistemology, and he consequently provides a much richer account of intentionality and of the objectivity of knowledge than Marcel, who provides little or no account of these crucial matters.

Marcel is not comfortable with the project of conceptual system-building in philosophy to the extent that Maritain is, and Maritain is not prepared to emphasize experience to the extent that Marcel is; herein lies their fundamental disagreement. Moreover, if Marcel had provided a detailed account of intentionality and of the realm of conceptual knowledge, one can also be sure that it would differ significantly from Maritain's analysis of these matters. However, from our vantage point I am surely right in suggesting that the differences between the two philosophers are not as significant as they themselves seemed to regard them. For we have seen in this chapter that Maritain and Marcel have many substantive points in common, and both thinkers are on the same side in their philosophy of the human person, in their epistemologies, and, of course, in their overall world-views.

In closing I want to consider briefly one objection often made against the notion of non-conceptual knowledge and suggest a way both philosophers might commonly respond. This objection is: how can the realm of non-conceptual knowledge be known and communicated at a philosophical level if it is truly non-conceptual? Contemporary philosophers are often uneasy with the suggestion that a type of non-conceptual knowledge allows us access to a realm that is beyond conceptual thinking. Some might object that it is not possible to discuss this realm of non-conceptual knowledge without objectifying it. And if we cannot objectify it, then how can we know it? More generally, this kind of objection is often motivated by the view that if the experiences to which Maritain and Marcel appeal cannot be discussed at a conceptual level, then we cannot really know anything about them at all.

Neither Maritain nor Marcel has explicitly addressed this criticism, but I believe their work provides the basis for an adequate response. If connaturality or secondary reflection is ultimately beyond the knowledge given in concepts, i.e., goes beyond the knowledge given in objectivity, then it must be "thought," "inadequately conceptualized," "approached" in *conceptual* knowledge (i.e., in metaphysics

or primary reflection). The point is that to *describe* non-conceptual knowledge we require conceptual knowledge. To put it more accurately, we can employ conceptual knowledge to describe or conceptualize certain experiences which must ultimately be *experienced* to be fully known, “known,” that is, at a level which is beyond the distinction between the self and the concept it grasps.<sup>39</sup> Both Maritain and Marcel are attempting such a description of non-conceptual knowledge in their *philosophical* work. Marcel also illustrates in his plays that it is in dramatic work that we best see the “mysteries of being” manifested, i.e., manifested at a level beyond mere thinking. In this way, art complements philosophy in attempting to understand and communicate some insight into the nature of the knowledge which is non-conceptual. Marcel and Maritain are in full agreement on this point. In drama, for example, various experiences are portrayed in the dramatic action such that we can recognize, not just as spectators but also as *participants*, the profundity of the experiences the characters undergo in the dramatic action. This recognition should at least make us *open* to the fact that such experiences are *possible* and *valuable*.<sup>40</sup>

Both these thinkers have shown us that it *is* possible to form at least an inadequate *concept* of the realm of non-conceptual knowledge to the extent that it can be identified and discussed on a *philosophical* level. Therefore, neither philosopher holds that this is a *totally* private realm to which *no* objective, collective access is possible. Critics may still insist that it is a private realm in the sense that it cannot be made *fully* objective and cannot be fully presented in conceptual knowledge. The reply to this charge is that it is true that the realm of non-conceptual knowledge cannot be made fully objective. Yet it is fallacious to claim that it must be *fully* private if it cannot be made *fully* objective, and, even more importantly, that it can have no philosophical or epistemological significance unless it can be made fully objective.<sup>41</sup> It is this philosophical point which both Maritain and Marcel expound most convincingly in their defense of the realm of non-conceptual knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>*Being and Having*, p. 38.

<sup>40</sup>Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. I, p. 66, where Marcel argues that realities which are not represented can nevertheless be experienced. See also Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup>Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, p. 92.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 6ff.