

ABSTRACT

“WHO AM I?”: EXPERIENCE AS THE UNITY BETWEEN THE PERSON AND THE WORLD IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF GABRIEL MARCEL (1889–1973)

Conor D. Hill

Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family
at the Catholic University of America, 2013

Director: David L. Schindler, Ph.D.
Readers: Nicholas J. Healy, Jr., D.Phil.
D. C. Schindler, Ph.D.

The question “Who am I?” and the nature of our experience of the world are tethered together. In both contemporary culture as well as in philosophical and theological reflection, we can perceive the signs of an uncertainty regarding the nature of the human person and the meaning of his or her experience. The philosophy of Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) is unequivocally rooted in a rich reflection upon human experience; for him, experience is an ontological unity between the person and the world. The purpose of this dissertation is to sketch the structure of experience as it can be gleaned from Marcel’s thought in order to clarify both the meaning (content) of experience as such and the manner in which experience thus understood likewise illumines the nature of the “I.”

The first part of the dissertation explains Marcel’s account of intuition, which is the core of experience. Intuition is the mind’s most fundamental contact with reality, insofar as one’s “I” (consciousness) is constituted in the simultaneity of knowing another

and of participating in being. The “I,” or ego, must therefore be ascribed with the adjective “concrete” in order to express its original unity with the world. This affirmation transforms the category of experience for it situates it *within* that encounter with the other which is at the origin of one’s self. The remainder of the dissertation unpacks the structure of experience insofar as it has its deepest roots in this notion of intuition.

The second part of the dissertation develops the embodied nature of intuition—embodiment is constitutive of the unity between the ego and the world. First, we look at the embodied structure of one’s awareness of the world and the manner in which sensation, understood in terms of participation, leads to a novel account of the subject-object relation of which the act of knowledge is comprised. Second, we explain Marcel’s ontological account of the unity between person and the world, in which the meaning of every experience is rooted in the meaning of being. In this light, intersubjectivity is a unique expression of the ontological dimension of human experience, and opens the horizon upon which personal existence is able to find its true meaning: the recognition and affirmation of the Absolute Thou. These final reflections show that human experience, for Marcel, possesses an inherently symbolic and analogical dimension.