

**THE BROKEN WORLD: A REFLECTION ON GABRIEL MARCEL'S  
PHILOSOPHY**

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**Abstract**

*In the world, religious intolerance, wars, killings, human rights abuse, kidnapping, banditry, political instability, corruption, and dehumanization has become the new normal in human coexistence. This paper has two major objectives; firstly to examine Gabriel Marcel's philosophy to restore human dignity. Secondly, it intends to expose some issues that are detrimental to human coexistence in society. It further focuses on the development of individual concrete existence, the restoration of mutual respect and trust in human relationships, and man's dignity through Gabriel Marcel's philosophy.*

**Keywords:** Broken world, human coexistence, inters subjectivity, human dignity and development.

**Introduction**

It has been a common thing for some people from various parts of the world not to listen, read, or watch what happens in social media or print media on daily basis. This is a result of bad, evil, heartbreaking, dehumanizing, unpleasant, unpalatable, and ridiculous news one gets from the media space. This situation is likened to what Thomas Hobbes (1963: 85) called the "State of Nature." In this state man is a wolf to his fellow man. Therefore to drive this point home, Hobbes opines that an invader has no more to fear than man's single power, if one plants, sows, builds or possesses a convenient seat, others may come with force to dispossess and deprive him, not only of his fruit of labour but also of his life or liberty. And this invader may be attacked by another invader (85). Hence, one may observe that there was no other rule of action than self-interest and satisfaction. Thus, there is man's inhumanity to man; which is characterized by selfishness, self-preservation, under-development, low industry, continuous fear, and insecurity. Furthermore, man's life

became solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Accordingly, this has also made some groups, individuals, or nations be categorized as “subalterns”, while others are known as “subalterns” and are treated as such. (Binebai, 2015:207).

The above situation makes some philosophers reflect on human existential realities (Sartre, 1989, Beckett, 2006, Camus, 1956) to awaken society’s consciousness. As a result of this, one takes succour in reflecting on Gabriel Marcel’s philosophy of human existence to proffer solutions to some world existential problems. Thus, Marcel made a serious commitment to the development of individual concrete existence, a revival of respect and trust in mutual human coexistence. One believes that through this, our society will see and recognize their fellow being as humans no matter their race, colour or religion.

### **Gabriel Marcel's Philosophy on Human Existence**

Gabriel Marcel is a French theistic existentialist, playwright, drama critic and musician, who was born in 1889 and died in 1973. In his philosophy, he investigated the problem of being especially on the existential question “What am I? To address the above question, he makes a distinction between a problem and a mystery. To understand this further, he makes an analogy of a broken world where one lives as a functionalized person. Thus he states that the broken world is on the one hand riddled with problems and, on the other, determined to allow no room for mystery” (Marcel, 1995: 12). In this situation, difficulties, crises, discrimination, death and pressure confront one in his existential realities. Marcel believes that because of one’s functionalized personality in the modern world, one is reduced to a machine or object, which makes one lose the sense of wonder about being. Thus, this situation is characterized by one's inability to reflect and a denial of the transcendent. (Marcel, 1995: 36-37). Accordingly, in his distinction between problem and mystery he states;

A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But 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 what is in me and what is before I lose its meaning and initial validity” (Marcel, 1949: 117).

Accordingly, a problem refers to a lack of knowledge or information, and if one does proper research or works hard, the solution or the needed knowledge is assured. Hence, a problem deals with a relationship between objects, and with data and technology, one can solve problems. Following the above, Marcel opines that is not possible to answer the question ‘What am I? when reduced to a problem, analyzing the parts and giving a

solution to it. This is because the question of human existence deals with mystery, and human beings are composed of subjects and objects. The subjective part of 'myself' cannot be eliminated or reduced to a mere object, hence is a mystery. Further, he sees mystery as a problem that encroaches on its data (Marcel, 1995:19). For him, this kind of 'problem' is meta-problematic, whereby "it is a question the identity of the questioner is an issue, and also the questioner is involved in the question he or she is asking. Marcel believes that mystery is insoluble unlike a problem, not senseless, and it is difficult to be communicated or described, but deals with participation which builds one's reality as a subject. (Marcel, 1949: 114). Therefore, the mystery becomes certain experiences that cannot translate into objects rather they include the subject. So Marcel believes that element of mystery is irreducible since human existence is a combination of 'being and having'. For instance, if we have things and ideas, they can be expressed in objective terms, like "I have a new car". But, being will always be a subjective matter.

From, the above, Marcel argues that human existence derives its full meaning from the subjective affirmation of Being through fidelity. Fidelity, he opines gives clues to the nature of one's existence and shapes one's life, and it is discovered through friendship and love. In addition, Marcel has the concept of inter-subjectivity as a panacea to the problem of human existence. He sees it as a feeling of togetherness or bond by individuals to know themselves and their diverse beings. Hence, he buttresses that the other exists for me only insofar as I am open to him (insofar as he is a thou), but I am only open to him in so far as I cease to form a circle myself within which I somehow place the other". Marcel further uses the parameter of availability' (disponibility or disposability) and 'unavailability' (indisponibilite or non-disposability) mode to measure the inter-subjective relationships, while the former describes the transcendent inter-subjective relationship; the latter describes the immanent or objectifying inter-subjective relationship. Thus, he states;

It will perhaps be made clearer if I say the person who is at my disposal is the one who is capable of being with me with the whole of himself when I am in need; while the one who is not at my disposal seems merely to offer me a temporary loan raised on his resources. For the one I am a presence; for the other, I am an object (Marcel 1995: 40).

Here, to be available to the other means to be present to and for the other, to make one's resources available to him, and be open and permeable to him. Thus, Marcel believes that authentic existence is when the true worth of a man is recognized concerning his fellow men.

### **Mode of Relationship in the Society**

The essence of Gabriel Marcel's philosophy is about the dignity and concrete development of individual beings which is tied to the development and welfare of others. In our society today, the mode of existence is defined and characterized by many irregularities such as war, corruption, ethnic violence, religious violence, political instability, food insecurity, banditry, kidnapping, economic and political alienation, dehumanization, and pandemic among other ills and deaths in the society. For instance, in the world today the "unavailability" mode of relationship plays out the scene in Russia - the Ukrainian war. This war has caused immense human suffering, damaged global trade, and caused food and energy crises. No wonder, Okonjo-Iweala (2022) observes that smaller supplies and higher food prices mean that the world's poor could be forced to do without. Thus, this war has a massive negative impact on the world to the extent of causing food insecurity and loss of lives, but this situation should have been avoided if there is understanding and love among the countries.

Accordingly, in African countries like Nigeria, the mode of existence is characterized by corruption, ethnic and religious crises, banditry, terrorism, political instability, insecurity, and bad government among other social ills (Ofoegbu, 2014, Ugwu, 2020). This attitude represents what Marcel termed the unavailability mode of existence that tends to treat the being of other people as an object of manipulation, without considering their intrinsic values as human beings. No wonder, Nigeria's 2023 election to elect the leadership of the country was marred with a lot of irregularities which was even aided by the electoral commission. Thus, the Transition Monitoring Group, TMG observes that there is a high level of irregularities during the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly election. For them, it was flawed by massive vote buying, violence, intimidation of voters and disregard for the electoral act (Rafsanjani, 2023). Also in Nigeria, a cartoon of the Prophet in Turkey, urinating close to a mosque or an ordinary comment can cause a religious crisis among the Muslim faithful.

Similar to this is the colonial practices against their colonies' economic dependence and exploitation, dehumanization, cultural imperialism, disunity, poor education, and misrule of government among others. Also is the postcolonial mentality that categorizes some groups of people as subalterns, ignorant, undeveloped, and powerless, oppressed, while others are superaltern, powerful, oppressor, knowledgeable and developed. This mentality has continued to pervade and pervert the world ensuing in manipulation, subjugation, dehumanization, oppressing of people and counter-reactions from the oppressed. This is typified by the relationship between the big nations and the small nations as it pertains to

social, political, and economic aspects. As a result of this, one ought to ask; why should Russia invade Ukraine? Why should a wealthy African country like Nigeria be poor and her citizens suffer? Why should ordinary religious comments in Europe bring about the religious uprising in Nigeria? Why should North Korea be terrorizing the world with a nuclear weapon? Why should there be accusations and counter-accusations of masterminding a pandemic in society? Why should there be racism because of skin colour?

Another way to understand and explain this relationship is through Martin Buber's concept of the "I thou" and "I it" relationship. Accordingly, "I thou relationship" implies the kind of relationship which entails subject to the subject and requires every commitment to foster the interest of the two parties; the parties are committed in making sure that none is hurt. Here, none of the parties is seen as a means to an end but an end in themselves. But the "I it" relationship entails object and subject, meaning there is no equality in the relationship. It is seen as manipulation of the object that has no value and is used as a means to an end. Thus, the "I it" relationship is used as an object of manipulation to achieve one's end (Buber, 1996: 32). And this is the mode of existence and relationship that is obtainable in our society and is devoid of humanism, love, fidelity and peaceful coexistence, hence, the broken world.

From the foregoing, it shows that our world is indeed broken, and riddled with problems. It is now a place where one loses his "beingness", and it is reduced to an object and measured by his function or worth. Here, human society is governed by might is right, survival of the fittest, and the nature of man becomes egoistic, possessive, calculative, atomistic, individualistic, and tends towards self-preservation. Hence, man has become a means to an end and his being is plagued by crises, difficulties, and his needs are forgotten. Taking solace in Gabriel Marcel's philosophy there is a need for members of our society to reflect on our broken world and have regard for human dignity and relationship. One may be asked, how can one achieve these?

### **The Way Forward**

Accordingly, Marcel's philosophy talks about creative fidelity and it entails the commitment to acts that draw subjects closer to others with respect. This makes the subject open to changing his mind, beliefs and actions if it does not guarantee authentic existence. Here, one (party, state, group, individual) is encouraged to reach out to the opposition in love and dialogue their differences to give peace a chance. For instance, France as a country colonized some African nations to the detriment of their growth and development. But, it is time for France to dialogue with these nations and demonstrate true friendship and love, this will guarantee harmonious coexistence and positive bilateral

relationship among them, instead of rancour and hatred. Same with Russia and Ukraine in the ongoing war among the duo, to reshape the lives of the society from fear, anxiety, destruction, and death to hope, courage, rehabilitation, and better living. Hence, one ought to respect and recognize the presence of self as being- among-being and acknowledge their relevance as a human person. Marcel encourages one to be considerate in relationships with others and society. And in dealing with one another we should be open-minded and our feelings should be facilitated by empathy. So in dealing with one another there should be dialogue and understanding, instead of suppression or oppression that is detrimental to human existence. And this kind of disposition ought to be adopted by every society and individual to guarantee human dignity, individual and societal development and harmonious coexistence.

He also talks of participation that involves a secondary reflection through which the subject sees himself as a being among other beings and views others as subjects instead of objects. Here, Marcel helps us to know and understand the intrinsic value and worth of man in society, against the objectification of man in the technological and scientific age. Through this there is the restoration of mutual respect and trust in human relationships, thereby promoting the dignity of man in his society. Here, every group, individual, society or nation ought to understand the value of one another in society. There will be no threat, humiliation, dehumanization, alienation, intimidation, or re-colonization among societies. Hence, North Korea, Israel, the USA, France, China, and Russia among other societies will see others as subjects instead of objects. Thus, one will not be seen as a means to an end, but an end in itself. He will not be alienated or dehumanized by his fellow being in society. This is will counter the new normal in society, where kidnapping, war, suppression, insecurity and other social ills reign.

Accordingly, one knows that no society can develop in a situation where man lacks freedom. Hence, Marcel's idea of presence which is a mystery and recognizes the self as being among beings, and acknowledges the relevance of others, guarantees the freedom of man. Although, we live in a broken world where there is a breach of human freedom and abuse of human rights by individuals and groups, which plays out the scene in Nigeria among other societies. Here, there will be respect for human life and human rights, which will guarantee individual concrete development and peace in society. Thus, Marcel's philosophy serves as an intervention in helping others and drives the commitment to the development of individual concrete existence and society. Hence, no individual or group will have the monopoly of violence or undue influence against another. No wonder, Marcel believes that one owes great responsibility to one another in society.

Furthermore, Marcel's idea of availability which refers to the measure in which one is available to someone with his resources to offer guarantees individual coexistence in society. Here, Marcel promotes communal relationships and encourages having the interest of others at heart and helping them to solve their problems. Thus, former colonial power like France and Britain will extend the hands of fellowship to their former colonies and facilitate their growth and development, instead of raping them of the resources, same with the so-called developed and undeveloped nations. This will bring about the spirit of complementarity in society, through which a member supplies whatever is lacking or needed by another. It also ensures mutual respect and dependence. Through this philosophy, the individuals and groups in society will cooperate and coexist, and they will respect and protect their various interests. And no country will wake up one morning and invade another, or one group oppresses another, rather the watchword will be cordiality, understanding, and cooperation.

Consequently, we must create awareness, revive and embrace some universal values that are neglected, rejected and suppressed in our social, economic, political, and religious life. Through this, one will restore humanity to its proper honour, glory, dignity and development, and other challenges of the society will be history. Hence, the broken world will be mended and made whole again.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel intending to restore human dignity and value. It exposed some existential issues characterizing society as a broken world, which are detrimental to human existence. Thus, it reflected the concrete existence of man in society, whereby he is treated as a means to an end and is objectified as being a subject and a mystery.

Hence, it suggests the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel for the restoration of human coexistence, human dignity and development. This is because Marcel's primary purpose is to make us have a secondary reflection that reconciles us with the world and each other. He, therefore, urges us to be available and committed to others in society.

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