

SYNIDESIS  
OR THE MIND'S COMPREHENSIVE GAZE

The understanding of mystery as adopted by Gabriel Marcel assumes—according to Michał Węclawski—that “a mystery is built on a problem; in the conceptual dimension, a mystery comes later than a problem and by offering a contradiction to it, the mystery brings the problem to a higher level. Still,

if the problem can be pondered over at the abstract level, then the mystery can only be fathomed out in the process of personal thinking, immersed in everyday experience.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is not a speculative way of thinking. Marcel mentions metaphysical thought as a reflection directed at a mystery. He claims that “an essential part of a mystery [is] that it should be acknowledged; metaphysical reflection presupposes this acknowledgment, which is outside its own sphere.... A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete 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 me loses its meaning and its initial validity.”<sup>23</sup> Marcel turns against the spirit of abstraction<sup>24</sup> because he believes that only when the subject–object dualism is overcome, the mystery of existence will be revealed: it will be exposed in the metaphysical reflection, which the French philosopher calls “secondary reflection.”<sup>25</sup> Unlike primary reflection, it is not an abstract speculation, but a concrete philosophy (the philosophy of thinking thought) which consists in the constant effort to capture the experience as it is, through the toil of successive approximations to the mystery of existence.<sup>26</sup> Joanna Wilkońska points out that “generally speaking, primary reflection dismantles an object (which is often required by methods of analysis) and stops there. Only secondary reflection, as an in-depth way of thinking, has the possibility of uniting and reconciling individual elements. It does not happen, however, as in the case of primary reflection, on the basis of collating or reconciling data, but in an effort to regain a disturbed unity.”<sup>27</sup> It is therefore a process which is more insightful than speculative, more intuitive than discursive. In this sense, secondary reflection constitutes seeing rather than reasoning, or an understanding vision of a subject who discovers its existence in experiencing their own “I am” (the “situation” in which they find themselves) and feels it as being one with what exists (with the world).<sup>28</sup> This experience of one’s own being is defined by Marcel as existence, and the cognitive depiction co-granted with it appears precisely as existential

<sup>22</sup> W ę c ł a w s k i, “Gabriel Marcel i etyka heterocentryczna”: 287.

<sup>23</sup> Gabriel M a r c e l, *Being and Having*, trans. K. Farrer (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948), 100–17.

<sup>24</sup> See Gabriel M a r c e l, *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1963), 123.

<sup>25</sup> M a r c e l, *Being and Having*, 121, 125, 140.

<sup>26</sup> See G a d a m e r, *Neokantyzm, filozofia egzystencji, filozofia dialogu*, 446–7.

<sup>27</sup> Joanna W i l k o Ń s k a, “W kierunku nieuwarunkowanego: egzystencja w filozofii Gabriela Marcela” [Towards the unconditional: Existence in the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel], *Kultura i Edukacja*, no. 4 (2004): 31.

<sup>28</sup> See G a d a m e r, *Neokantyzm, filozofia egzystencji, filozofia dialogu*, 447–8; M a r c e l, *Reflection and Mystery*, 93.

seeing. In fact, it is, in its nature, a view that unites the four aspects that fall under the experience of existence which Marcel describes as follows: “Person–engagement–community–reality: there we have a sort of chain of notions which, to be exact, do not readily follow from each other by deduction ... but of which the union can be grasped by an act of the mind. It would be better not to call this act by the much abused term of intuition, but by one which on the contrary is too little used—that of synopsis [orig. *synidèse*, translated as *synidesis* elsewhere], the act by which a group is held together under the mind’s comprehensive gaze.”<sup>29</sup> However, it is not an act separated from this whole, because in the experience of the mystery—and this is what the experience of one’s own existence essentially is—the subject–object relation (separation of thinking from existence) disappears. “The opposition of subject and object,” writes Marcel using the example of the relation of consciousness to existence in the body, “is found to be transcended from the start. Inversely, if I start from the opposition, treating it as fundamental, I shall find no trick of logical sleight of hand which lets me get back to the original experience, which will inevitably be either eluded or (which comes to the same thing) refused.”<sup>30</sup> Understood as existential seeing, *synidesis* (or *synopsis*) does not lead to conceptual diversification, intellectual problematisation and speculation, but in the opposite direction: towards participation.

Marcel’s conviction is that being reveals itself in an individual existence that feels and experiences it, and therefore not in an impersonal way, but through an intimate bond with it, making the association between the experience of existence and its direct cognition (*synidesis* or *synopsis*) and participation.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence, according to Joanna Wilkońska, “participation will consist in the attitude of unprejudiced openness on the one hand and in cooperation with the surrounding world on the other; however, this world should not be treated as an object, but as ‘you’ with whom I am to enter into dialogue.”<sup>32</sup> For Marcel, though, this necessity of dialogue points to something more than the mere duty of communication; namely, to an ontological need which in the deepest layers of the person manifests itself in the form of some inner mysterious appeal which calls man to transcend himself, to actively open himself to the external reality.<sup>33</sup> The ontological need manifests itself, then, as the necessity of being which for a fully awake individual (an existence seeking the meaning of its being) becomes a desire to be more “at home” and to be for the other: it turns

<sup>29</sup> Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Marcel, *Being and Having*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> See Gadacz, *Neokantyzm, filozofia egzystencji, filozofia dialogu*, 447–8.

<sup>32</sup> Wilkońska, “W kierunku nieuwarunkowanego: egzystencja w filozofii Gabriela Marcela”: 34.

<sup>33</sup> See Ignacy Dec, “Homo viator jako kategoria antropologiczna” [Homo viator as an anthropological category], *Collectanea Theologica* 55, no. 2 (1985): 8.

into participation. “The ontological need,” emphasizes Marcel, “in the effort to explain itself, is found not to be comparable with the search after a solution.... The metaproblematic is a participation on which my reality as subject is built (WE DO NOT BELONG TO OURSELVES).”<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, the French philosopher writes about it as follows: “The best part of my personality does not belong to me. I am in no sense the owner, only the trustee.... Indeed, if we come to think of it, there is nothing in me which cannot or should not be regarded as a gift.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, participation appears as a satisfaction to the ontological need of the human “I” realised through the person’s inner opening to a person.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, thanks to participation, existence becomes coexistence, and synid-esis (synopsis)—a vision embracing also the existential situation of the other in its drama and specificity. According to Karol Tarnowski, “Marcel comes to an increasing realisation that this participation par excellence is ontological in nature: closeness to the human and divine ‘you’ is ‘co-esse,’ i.e., co-existence, in the bosom of the deepest dimension of participation.... The path to discover this dimension runs through the ‘requirement of the Transcendent,’ which unconsciously penetrates us from the beginning, through all life experiences.”<sup>37</sup> Tadeusz Gadacz writes in this context: “At the same time, existence, or the feeling of our own being, reveals to us the feeling that we do not truly exist yet.... The ontological need also assumes the requirement of Transcendence. For Marcel, transcending does not mean crossing all limits (for example cognitive ones) in order to possess (have) something, but to be fuller... Being is given in a participation that cannot be objectivised, in communion of a person with themselves, with others, with God.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, communion becomes the fullest manifestation of participation, a kind of “where to” of the human existence, and at the same time it constitutes the kind of encounter in which synopsis has a chance to be transformed into a spiritual vision. However, while the former is primarily related to existential experience, the latter dimension of seeing—built on the former—becomes reality, among others, in a synodal experience.

<sup>34</sup> M a r c e l, *Being and Having*, 111.

<sup>35</sup> M a r c e l, *Homo Viator*, 19.

<sup>36</sup> See D e c, “Homo viator jako kategoria antropologiczna”: 8.

<sup>37</sup> Karol T a r n o w s k i, “Gabriela Marcela filozofia wiary” [Gabriel Marcel’s philosophy of faith], *Analecta Cracoviensia*, nos. 21–22 (1989–1990): 104.

<sup>38</sup> G a d a c z, *Neokantyzm, filozofia egzystencji, filozofia dialogu*, 448–9.