

8-1-2010

Atheistic and Christian Existentialism: A Comparison of Sartre and Marcel

Thomas C. Anderson

Marquette University, thomas.anderson@marquette.edu

Accepted version. "Atheistic and Christian Existentialism: A Comparison of Sartre and Marcel," in *New Perspectives in Sartre*. Eds. Adrian Mirvish and Adrian van den Hoven. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010: 44-63. [Publisher link](#), © 2010 Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Used with permission.

Atheistic and Christian Existentialism: A Comparison of Sartre and Marcel

Thomas C. Anderson

*Department of Philosophy, Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI*

In *Existentialism and Humanism* Jean-Paul Sartre states that there are "two kinds of existentialists," the atheistic, in which he includes himself, and the Christian, among whom he includes his fellow countryman Gabriel Marcel.¹ Needless to say, these two existentialists significantly disagree on many things and yet, surprisingly, they also have notable areas of agreement, as we shall see. The purpose of this paper is to compare the views of the two men on a number of important philosophical issues. My comparison is aided by the fact that Sartre and Marcel knew each other personally and occasionally directly commented in writing on each other's ideas.

First, some information about their history and personal relationship. Both men were born, Marcel in 1889, Sartre in 1905, and for the most part lived and wrote in Paris. Marcel was sixteen years older than Sartre and died seven years earlier, in 1973. Each of them studied in Paris (Sartre at L'école normale superior, Marcel at the Sorbonne) and after passing the *agrégation* held various teaching positions in France for a few years. They probably first met at the very popular informal philosophical gatherings Marcel hosted almost weekly at his home beginning in the 1940s after the end of World War II.

Marcel, Beauvoir, and others refer to those get-togethers and mention that the young Sartre presented papers there. Marcel also says that at that time relations among the three of them were cordial.² In fact, Marcel was one of the first French thinkers to review some of Sartre's early works and to insist that his thought was "powerful and important." He also stated that he was "happy and proud" to have suggested certain topics to Sartre that he subsequently pursued. Marcel also praised Sartre for some of his analyses of concrete examples, especially for his "phenomenological study of the other."³

According to Marcel, a break between them occurred because of their sharp disagreement over the trials and purges that were carried out in France after the second world war.⁴ He complained that the so-called courts of justice which tried and passed sentences on alleged collaborators were often composed of men and women who, because of their sufferings during the occupation, could hardly be fair and impartial in their verdicts. Sartre and the existentialists, who were very popular at that time, in effect supported those courts by cynically challenging traditional principles of fairness and impartiality. Unfortunately, the two men remained estranged for the rest of their lives.

I should add that both men were heavily influenced by the phenomenological movement initiated by Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century. The philosophical "method" each adopted consisted in carefully reflecting on and describing phenomena (acts of consciousness or their objects) as they appear and are lived in ordinary human experiences of our self and of our world. The goal of such descriptions is ultimately to bring to light the essential structures of what is present in experience.

My procedure in discussing some major areas of philosophical disagreement between the two will be as follows:

- A. I will set out positions that Sartre apparently adopts and explain why he adopts them.
- B. I will present Marcel's criticism of those positions and offer his alternative(s).
- C. I will evaluate the validity of Marcel's criticisms.

Ontology

A. *Sartre's position*: I begin with Sartre's classification of being set forth in *Being and Nothingness* and other early works. As the result

of what he claims is phenomenological analysis, he divides all reality into just two realms, being-for-itself (human consciousness) and being-in-itself.⁵ Consciousness is described as nonsubstantial and contentless, that is, as "entirely activity and spontaneity," "self-determining," "self-activated" and, therefore, free.⁶ Being-in-itself, on the other hand, is passive and inert, so identical with itself and filled with being that it is a totally undifferentiated, full positivity of being. These two realms are "absolutely separated regions of being," Sartre claims, because being-in-itself is so filled with being "that it does not enter into any connection with what is not itself." It is "isolated in its being."⁷ While he grants that there are relations which in a sense unite the two kinds of being, such relations are only one way. Only consciousness is related to being inasmuch as it exists only as consciousness of being. Being in itself has no relation with consciousness nor, strictly speaking, even with itself. It simply "is itself" and "glued to itself" as a full positivity of being.⁸

One important result of Sartre's definition of being in itself as one with itself and "isolated" in its being is that being for itself, human consciousness, is totally free from any influence of being in itself. The relation of consciousness to being is entirely negative. "Consciousness of something" ultimately involves "not being that being" and this, Sartre says, preserves consciousness from being affected by the beings it is aware of.⁹

Accordingly, when we turn to his most extensive treatment of freedom and its relation to other things and people in Part IV, Chapter One of *Being and Nothingness*, we find Sartre insisting on the total freedom of consciousness or being for itself *and of human reality*. He minimizes to the point of denial any limitations of human freedom and speaks of it as "absolute," "total," "infinite," and "without limits." Note the following statement: "Man can not be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all."¹⁰

B. *Marcel's criticism*: Marcel objects to Sartre's division of reality into two realms of being absolutely separate from each other and he also rejects Sartre's claim that he arrived at that division by phenomenological analysis. On the basis of his own reflections on experience, Marcel denies that human reality is isolated from the things of this world and that worldly things have no impact on human beings and their consciousnesses. He insists instead on their "participation" with each other, meaning by that that humans are

neither isolated from things of the world nor from other human beings but are essentially connected to both. The result is that things can not only affect and change me externally (e.g. fire can burn me), they can affect me "internally" in my thoughts, feelings, and choices. Every human being is to some degree in union with or bound to what is not oneself. We are "beings-in-the-world," he states, and so are fundamentally dependent on others and on the world. Our being is totally exposed, vulnerable, and permeable to the things and people among which we exist.¹¹ "I am in the world," he writes, "only insofar as the world ... [is] something shaping me as in a womb" and a kind of "primordial bond ... unites the human being to a particular, determined, and concrete environment."¹² The concrete situations of our lives are not objective facts which exist independent of us. The person I am and have become is to a great extent the result of the particular circumstances with which I have lived and interacted throughout the course of my life. Of course, the other human beings I have encountered, in particular my family and friends, have especially influenced me externally and internally. Thus, Marcel categorically rejects *Being and Nothingness's* claim that human freedom is total, unlimited, and absolute. Reflection on the given facts of human experience have not forced Sartre to his conclusions, he states, his ontological presuppositions have.¹³ An unbiased look at our lived experience reveals that human beings and their freedoms are affected and limited, sometimes severely, by the many people and things they encounter in the world.

C. *Evaluation of Marcel's criticisms:* I believe that Marcel's critiques of the ontology of *Being and Nothingness* are well taken. But I must immediately add that by 1960, when the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* was published, Sartre had made it abundantly clear that he himself had significantly modified much of his earlier ontology and its description of two separate realms of being. While he generally continues to divide reality into human beings and nonhuman things, he affirms his agreement with Marx that the relations between human organisms and each other and the world are dialectical in nature. That is, there is mutual interaction and causation between humans and the world and that can significantly restrict an individual's freedom. Indeed, the *Critique's* purpose, Sartre says, is to show the presence of the dialectic in human history starting from humans acting on the world to fulfill their needs and the things of the world in turn acting or

reacting on human beings.¹⁴ The hundreds of pages of the *Critique* contain an abundance of illustrations of the myriad dialectical relations between human beings and the physical world and other human beings and the social, political, economic, and cultural structures they create. Lest there be any doubt, Sartre explicitly repudiates his earlier view that human freedom is absolute or unlimited: "it would be quite wrong to interpret me as saying that man is free in all situations ... I mean the exact opposite: all men are slaves insofar as their life unfolds in the practico-inert field," that is, in the field comprised of physical things and social structures shaped by human activity. He mentions such things as one's class, standard of living, type of work, specific culture. In general the practico-inert is "a determinate provision of material and intellectual tools; it is a strictly limited field of possibilities."¹⁵

The conclusion to draw, then, is that Marcel's (and many others') criticisms of Sartre's early ontology in *Being and Nothingness* while accurate, do not apply to Sartre's later, 1960, dialectical vision of reality, a vision which explicitly rejected the description of two separate regions of being he set forth earlier. No doubt, the criticisms that Marcel and others made of that bifurcation of being were at least partly responsible for the changes Sartre made in his ontology.¹⁶

The Nature and Source of Value

A. *Sartre's position:* In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre makes it very clear that he believes all values are human creations. He rejects what he calls "the spirit of seriousness," the view that some values are objective or, as he puts it, "written in things." Seriousness maintains that justice and honesty, for example, possess value independent of human choices or desires. It also claims that human beings have intrinsic value. In other words, even if no one chooses to value justice or to value human beings, the serious person insists they possess objective, inherent worth. For the spirit of seriousness, individual values are "transcendent givens independent of human subjectivity."¹⁷

Sartre, for his part, calls people cowards in bad faith who, in order to avoid recognizing their freedom, hide from themselves the fact that man "is the being by whom values exist" and that "his freedom [is] ... the unique source of value."¹⁸ In his essay "Existentialism and Humanism" Sartre roots the absence of objective

values in atheism. There is no God to create or decree anything to be of value. I will quote him at some length:

The [atheistic] existentialist...thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him Nowhere is it written that the good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie, because the fact is we are now on a plane where there are only men.

And he goes on to point out the consequences: "Dostoevsky said, 'If God did not exist, everything would be permitted.' That is the very starting point for existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist."¹⁹

Sartre is equally clear in *Being and Nothingness* about what results from the denial of objective values. Since only human freedom is the source of values, he writes, that "paralyzes" and "relativizes" ethics, for it means that whatever one freely chooses to value, whether justice or injustice, will thereby be of value. "My freedom is the sole foundation of values," he claims, and as a result "nothing, absolutely nothing justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values."²⁰ I cannot appeal to any objective value criterion, such as God's law, to justify the values I choose since that criterion itself would be of value only if I freely choose it to be.

In his more technical discussion of the nature and source of values in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that values are experienced as norms or imperatives and as such they are not real but demands to be made real. Values are not facts or what is the case but norms expressing what should be. But if values are demands beyond what is, their reality can come only from a being that can go beyond what is and grasp what is not. Such a being is, of course, being for itself or human consciousness insofar as it is free to transcend what is and grasp what is not. Hence human freedom is the source of all values.²¹

B. *Marcel's criticisms*: There are basically two criticisms of Sartre's subjectivist position on values offered by Marcel. The first is the very traditional one which argues that the consequences would be disastrous if all values are only the creation of human freedom. "The way would then lie open to the worst abuses and abominations"²² for

one could freely choose to value sexual abuse, slavery, and genocide. To be sure, others could freely choose to value love, justice, and peace. But there would be absolutely no basis for claiming that one set of values is any better (more valuable) than another. As Sartre says, "*nothing* justifies me in adopting this or that value, this or that set of values." Simply put, if all values are created by human freedom, then anything, no matter how horrific, could be made valuable by that freedom.

Marcel's second criticism is from a phenomenological perspective, a perspective which, as we have noted, Sartre himself claims to adopt. If we reflect honestly on our experiences of values, Marcel claims, we will find that we do not experience them to be our free creations but we recognize them as imposed on us: "If I examine myself honestly and without reference to any preconceived body of ideas, I find that I do not "choose" my values at all but that I *recognize* them." Indeed, "value is essentially something which does not allow itself to be chosen."²³ I understand that to mean that when I experience or recognize something as valuable, such as the lives of innocent children, and, therefore, morally condemn enslaving them, my experience/recognition is that the value of those children is not up to my free choice. Rather, their value appears in them, whether one chooses to recognize it or not, and even if one wishes it weren't there. If Sartre were correct and values were my free creations, I could simply choose not to value the lives of those innocent children and they would then possess no value. (I might refuse to confer value on them in order to avoid any personal responsibility for defending them.) But when children's lives appear to me to possess values, my experience is that those lives *demand* to be recognized and defended. Even if I turn my back on them, their intrinsic value continues to tug at me.

Perhaps a stronger argument for the objective reality of values can be found in Marcel's reflections on human experiences of loving fidelity.²⁴ He notes that some people commit themselves unconditionally to faithfully love other human beings, such as their spouses, children, and friends, even to the extent of putting their lives on the line for them. Others commit themselves unconditionally to causes such as freedom or peace and are willing to live and die for them. Now what could explain why some offer pledges of unconditional fidelity and love to other humans or to causes? Marcel answers that

unconditional loving fidelity makes sense only if those who make such commitments experience the presence of unconditional value in those people or causes. Furthermore, those values must be *intrinsically* present in my spouse and children or in peace for if they issue from human freedom as Sartre claims, then they can be removed by human freedom. As I said above, if it became too dangerous for me to assign value to something or someone, I could simply freely decide that they have no value and they would have none. Indeed, to offer unconditional love and fidelity to someone or something whose value comes from human freedom and so can be removed by human freedom seems foolish in the extreme. Those who pledge themselves unconditionally to others and /or causes are fundamentally deluded and foolish. In a Sartrean universe the most heroic human acts of self-sacrifice are utterly incomprehensible. How can Sartre praise the heroes of the French resistance movement during WWII and condemn the Nazis, Marcel asks, if there are no objective values such as courage and justice?²⁵ I might add that Sartre's own efforts on behalf of the Algerian freedom fighters, efforts which he undertook in conditions which posed great danger to his life, also seem hard to reconcile with his claim that nothing has objective or intrinsic value.

C. *Evaluation of Marcel's criticisms:* Twenty years after the publication of his 1943 phenomenological ontology, in 1964, Sartre presented a public lecture in Rome in which he set out at some length what he later called his second ethics. That designation distinguished it from his first ethics written in the 1940s and based on *Being and Nothingness*. He begins this public lecture by stating that the "central fact" of moral experience is its normative character. Every moral prescription, imperative, value and norm which we experience presents itself to us as demanding our obedience. Values and norms appear to us as moral duties, requirements, and obligations which we should follow and obey. They are not descriptions of facts but prescriptions of conduct.²⁶ Thus, by the time of this later work, Sartre agrees with Marcel that values are experienced as prescriptions imposed on us and not as our free creations. What, he asks, is the source of these values/norms? He answers, human needs: "The root of morality is in need."²⁷ Needs, Sartre explains, are not just the lack of something or other. They are felt exigencies, felt (at least obscurely) demands for satisfaction. Since we have various needs which demand to be satisfied, we experience certain objects (e.g. food, health,

knowledge, love) to be valuable and so to be norms and demands that we should attempt to realize. Ultimately we experience the human organism itself with needs fulfilled as our normative future, that is, as the highest end and supreme value we should obtain. "Need posits man as his own end," Sartre states. Note that that ultimate end, norm and value, the human being with its needs satisfied, is not something we freely select or can reject; it is "given" and "imposed" (Sartre's terms) on us by our needs."²⁸

Furthermore, since humans are a specific kind of organism having specific needs, certain specific kinds of objects are necessary to fulfill those needs. Since we do not freely choose the needs we have, we can not freely choose the general kind of things which fulfill those needs. Sartre mentions needs for oxygen and protein, for freedom and love, for other human beings and culture, for a meaningful life. And it is because we need them that oxygen, protein, freedom, love, culture, and so forth are experienced by us as having to be attained, that is, as values and norms. Again, these are "given," "assigned," and "imposed" on us, Sartre asserts.²⁹

Clearly, then, in the 1960s Sartre grants an objectivity to values that his earlier work did not. That objectivity does not come from some transcendent being or realm, it issues from our actual human needs. That objectivity gives values/norms an independence from human freedom since our choices can neither create nor remove the value of certain objects. Protein and love are valuable for the organism we are whether or not we freely choose them to be or want them to be.

We have here, then, another instance where Marcel's criticisms of Sartre's ideas apply only to the early Sartre and his early ontology. It may be that those criticisms were noted by Sartre and helped to prompt the change in his understanding of the source and nature of values. In any case, rooting values in human needs is significantly different from considering them to be the creations of human freedom.³⁰

Still, there remains a difference between the two men in the "seriousness," to use Sartre's term, which each ascribes to values. Rooting them in human needs is different from grounding them in a Creator of human beings as Marcel does. While he would certainly applaud Sartre's move granting more objectivity to values, I suspect Marcel would still maintain that he has not fully accounted for their

prescriptive, normative, obligatory character and in particular for the unconditional, unlimited value that human beings themselves possess. For Sartre human beings are objectively of value because their fulfillment, the satisfaction of their needs, is in fact their ultimate goal. For Marcel finite human beings ultimately possess unconditional value because they are gifts of a being who is infinite value itself, namely a loving creator, an absolute Thou.³¹ (More on this in Section V.) In the final analysis human beings remain the source of all values, including their own, for Sartre. Because the value of human beings is God given for Marcel, humans have significantly more worth and dignity in his universe. Likewise, since the ultimate source of their value and dignity is God, not human beings, the obligation to respect human beings and promote their well-being is, I would think, much stronger and more serious in Marcel's world than it is in Sartre's.

The Meaning of Life

A. *Sartre's position:* In the final pages of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre draws some grim conclusions from the view of human reality he has set forth in that work. He reviews something he established earlier, namely, that the ultimate value and goal humans seek is to be God. Insofar as human reality is radically unnecessary, contingent, it desires to be necessary. As he puts it, we want to exist "by right, "not as we do, purely "by chance." At the same time, in order to preserve our freedom, we want to give ourselves this right or necessity. If we receive necessity from some external cause such as God, that would make us simply a pawn in his cosmic plan. Now to desire to be a being who would justify its own existence by causing itself to be necessary and not by chance, is to desire to be a being which would cause itself to be, an *ens causa sui*, which Sartre calls God. Of course, a being that would be both necessary and free is impossible because self-contradictory. And so he concludes that our fundamental desire to be God, to be a being which would freely cause itself to be necessary, is in vain, a "useless passion." Since there is no way we can fulfill that passion, the result is that "human reality is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state."³²

We are condemned to despair; for all human activities are equivalent (for they all tend to sacrifice man in order that the self-cause may arise and all are on principle doomed to failure).

Thus it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations.³³

In other words, no matter how we attempt to be God, that is, to cause ourselves to exist by necessity, by right rather than by chance, whether it be drugs or political power or anything else, we are doomed to fail. When all is said and done we have no reason for our existence, we are contingent, entirely by chance.

B. *Marcel's criticism*: In his reviews of Sartre's early works Marcel often cites Sartre's statements (such as those in the previous section) that human existence is "doomed to failure." He recognizes that in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre comes to that conclusion because he believes that every human being seeks an unreachable goal, the "divinisation of himself" by "attaining to the dignity of the self-cause."³⁴ Not only this but as we saw in the previous section the early Sartre holds that nothing, not even human beings, possesses any inherent value or dignity. Accordingly, Marcel labels Sartre's position "nihilism" and says that it expresses a "degraded view" which "devalues" human existence. It is a "systematic vilification of man," for "to vilify a thing is to take away its value." Using unusually strong language, Marcel writes, "It is not at all surprising that in it [Sartre's philosophy] man should conceive of himself more and more as waste matter or as potential excrement!"³⁵

C. *Evaluation of Marcel's criticism*: It is true that Sartre never wavers in believing that human beings naturally desire the unattainable goal of being the total cause of themselves so that they exist by right, by necessity. However, contrary to what Marcel thinks, Sartre does not agree that seeking that impossible goal must render human life valueless or meaningless or doomed to failure. Rather, by our own free choices and those of others we can create meaningful, valuable lives for ourselves and others. Sartre makes this very clear in his early essay, "Existentialism and Humanism," written three years after *Being and Nothingness*. "Life has no meaning a priori," he states, "it's up to you to give it meaning, and value is nothing else but the meaning you choose."³⁶ Even though human life possesses no objective or intrinsic value or meaning, we ourselves can freely confer value on it. Recall that in his early ontology Sartre argued that human freedom is the only source of values. It follows, then, that if humans freely choose to value their lives, those lives will become valuable. In his *Notebooks for an Ethics* (written in the late 40s, published

posthumously) he puts this in terms of justification. Human beings can justify their lives, he says, by undertaking conversion, which means by ceasing to value, or working to attain, the impossible *causa sui* and choosing instead to give value to attainable goals such as human life itself.³⁷ More specifically, he recommends that we choose to value and promote the coming of a classless society embodying democratic socialism, also called "the city of ends." This would be a society where everyone chooses to confer value on his/her own existence and on everyone else's.³⁸

In his last work, *The Family Idiot*, he takes the same position. As unnecessary and finite, human beings seek a meaning and purpose to their lives that would confer necessity on them. We desire the absolute, the infinite, Sartre writes, a mandate for our lives that comes from an infinite being who created us for some purpose in his grand design and thereby justifies our being. He labels this desire the "religious instinct" and, of course, says it can not be satisfied: "Finitude makes them [creatures] mad for an unattainable infinite," he states. "Being created us in such a way that we can neither find it nor give up the search."³⁹ Once again it remains up to human beings themselves to confer meaning and purpose on their lives: "sense and non-sense in a human life are human in principle and come to the child of man from man himself." The most meaningful lives we can achieve will be ones where we cooperate to create our common humanity by constructing societies that fulfill our common human needs.⁴⁰

Thus Marcel's criticism that Sartre is a nihilist who degrades and vilifies human existence by denying it any value and dooming it to failure and meaninglessness is flagrantly wrong. At no time in his life did Sartre believe that human beings were inevitably doomed to valueless, meaningless lives. As we have seen, in his early ontology he insisted that humans themselves can make their lives meaningful and in later works he argued that was best accomplished by human beings working together to fulfill their needs. That being said, it also remains true that throughout his life Sartre maintained that the *ultimate* goal humans desire is to be God or to possess a totally justified existence, and that is not achievable. Since that is the case, I suspect that Marcel would continue to insist that in the final analysis human existence for Sartre is fated to be in despair and doomed to failure. While together we ourselves certainly can confer on our lives a richness of meaning and value, that can not cover up the fact that at the deepest level of

our being we long for a fullness of meaning and a complete justification of our existence that we can never attain.

Human Relations

A. *Sartre's position:* To say that *Being and Nothingness* dwells on the negative side of relations among human beings is an understatement. Sartre describes there many human interactions in great detail and argues that in every case, including love, they are attempts of one or more subjects to dominate or be dominated by others. Accordingly, he insists that conflict is the fundamental relation among subjects. "Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others," he writes, "the essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the *Mitsein*, it is conflict."⁴¹

On the ontological level, Sartre emphasizes conflict in order to stress the irreducible separateness of each individual from others, a separateness that can never be overcome by merging consciousnesses together into some supra-individual union. "So long as consciousnesses exist," he asserts, "the separation and conflict of consciousnesses will remain."⁴²

On the epistemological level, he believes that for one subject to be aware of another subject necessarily involves grasping that other subject as a thing-like object—and that is a degradation of him or her. Sartre also calls the objectification of another subject an "alienation" and "enslavement" of him or her. It is a degradation, alienation, and enslavement because the other free subject cannot control how I objectify it, that is, the other's freedom cannot control how I evaluate and judge him or her.⁴³ And since neither subject wants to be turned into a thing-like object, conflict between them is inevitable. It is inevitable too because no subject-to-subject relation between human beings is possible. Either I recognize the other as a free subject who objectifies and degrades me or I recognize myself as a free subject who objectifies and degrades the other. "No synthesis of these two forms is possible," Sartre maintains. To apprehend the other as both a free subject and an object is an "impossible ideal." "We shall never place ourselves ... on the plane where the recognition of the other's freedom would involve the other's recognition of our freedom." Thus, he concludes his detailed descriptions of concrete human relations from love to hate by reasserting, "It is useless, therefore, for human reality to seek to get out of this dilemma: one must either transcend

[objectify] the other or allow oneself to be transcended [objectified] by him."⁴⁴ This is summed up in his famous line, "the essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the *Mitsein*, it is conflict."

B. *Marcel's criticisms*: Marcel is just one of a countless number of commentators who objected that *Being and Nothingness's* descriptions of human relations were extremely one-sided. While he concedes that some of Sartre's analyses are "masterful," Marcel is particularly critical of his description of love even going so far as to say that the author of *Being and Nothingness* "has nowhere succeeded ...in conceiving it [love]."⁴⁵ Since he admits no possibility of subject to subject relations, love for Sartre is just one of many attempts of a free subject to dominate another.

As we just saw, all human relations are of the subject to object kind for Sartre and to make an object of a subject is to reify it and, therefore, to degrade, alienate, and enslave it. One of Marcel's responses to Sartre is simply that not all objectification of another involves a degradation of them or an enslavement of their freedom. I can be conscious of another (and, therefore, make them my object) with approval, respect, and love, and desire to assist them in becoming more free. Love, in particular, is not an attempt to dominate others or to control their freedom, Marcel says, but an attempt to enter into communion with them, to participate in their very being. Love is a true subject-to-subject or intersubjective relation.⁴⁶ One of Marcel's preferred ways of expressing that intersubjectivity is to designate love in all its forms (friendship, filial, maternal, etc.) as an I-thou rather than an I-you or I-him/her/it relation. The latter are subject to object relations; I-thou are subject to subject. (The English word thou is used to translate the familiar and intimate form of the pronoun you in French, *tu* instead of *vous*.) Furthermore, for Marcel I-thou relations involve a real union or communion of subjects, a union which recognizes the other subject "as a being endowed with a dignity and reality of his [and her] own."⁴⁷ This is precisely the kind of relationship which Sartre says is impossible.

To emphasize the union or bond between subjects present in love, Marcel speaks of "the indistinctness of the I and the thou" and states that love relations transcend the "categories of the same and the other." That is, subjects united in love do not fuse into one and the *same* being and yet they are not separate or distinct from each other. They are really united in a "suprapersonal unity," Marcel states, but it

is a unity which promotes the integrity and well being of each person. Each lover's being is enhanced by sharing and participating in the life and experiences of the beloved. Neither is diminished or destroyed for each lover respects the reality of the beloved and desires his/her fulfillment. All this Marcel claims is revealed by an unbiased phenomenological description of love.⁴⁸ But, of course, Sartre too claims to use the phenomenological method. Why, then, does the author of *Being and Nothingness* deny the possibility of subject-to-subject relations and unions?

Marcel believes that it is because Sartre conceives all interpersonal unions, including love, as material or physical in character. A physical union of two or more entities involves a physical modification or even destruction of one or both of them, as in a chemical or biological reaction. When a lion physically "unites" with a lamb by eating it, the latter is no longer a separate living organism but part of the lion. Just so, if love's intersubjective union is considered to be physical, then it will be viewed as an attempt to modify and control others, if not to destroy them—as Sartre does.⁴⁹

Love should rather be understood as a spiritual union, Marcel says. It is a genuine union but not one which physically disturbs the lover or the beloved. My wife does not change color or gain an inch or lose a pound from our loving bond. Of course, our spiritual oneness will affect each of us internally since we participate in each other's lives. My wife's joys and sorrows, her search for meaning and happiness truly become part of me and my life. Yet at the same time my love recognizes and affirms her as she is; after all it is *she* that I know and love.

C. *Evaluation of Marcel's criticisms:* Sartre's posthumous publication, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, makes it perfectly clear that he never intended to claim that the conflictual relations described in the ontology of *Being and Nothingness* were the only possible human relations. In the *Notebooks* he acknowledges that subjects can relate to each other primarily as subjects, or more precisely as subject/object to subject/object (since we can't totally avoid objectifying others). *Notebooks* also recognizes that to objectify other subjects does not inevitably degrade or alienate or enslave them, provided that we recognize them first and foremost as free subjects.⁵⁰ Perhaps most important Sartre explicitly states there that *Being and Nothingness* was not an attempt to set forth the necessary structure of all human

relations but only those of unconverted individuals, individuals who attempt to use or to eliminate others in order to become *causa sui*, God. If one recognizes the futility of pursuing that unattainable goal, he or she can undertake a ,conversion which as we saw in the previous section means the refusal to value or seek becoming God and hence the refusal to try and use others to attain that end. Early in his *Notebooks*, Sartre states that "the struggle of consciousnesses only makes sense before conversion." After conversion "there is no ontological reason to stay on the level of struggle." And in an explicit reference to *Being and Nothingness*, he asserts that conversion can transform the "hell" of human relations described there.⁵¹

In *Notebooks* Sartre also urges the adoption of an attitude of generosity toward others by which he means an attitude of willing and assisting them in achieving their freely chosen goals. He labels this attitude "authentic love" in order to clearly distinguish it from the love described in the earlier work. Furthermore, Sartre says, authentic love consists of unity between persons, "a certain kind of interpenetration of freedoms" where "each freedom is wholly in the other one." This unity, he explains, overcomes radical separation and otherness: "otherness is replaced by unity, even though ontically, otherness always remains." Otherness always remains because the unity in authentic love, Sartre insists, is not an ontological fusion of individual subjects into one supra-individual being but is rather a unity on the plane of will and action.⁵² I will return to this point below.

Sartre's recognition and appreciation of the positive side of human relations reaches its culmination in his last major work, *The Family Idiot*. There he describes in great detail our basic human need to be loved (authentically), respected and valued by others. Only if we are loved can we come to value and love ourselves and believe that we have a mandate for our existence and that our lives have purpose.⁵³

Thus, I believe that Marcel's criticism that Sartre recognizes only the negative side of human relations is not accurate since Sartre never intended to say that all relationships were of that kind. Marcel was not aware that Sartre's descriptions of human relations in *Being and Nothingness* were to be taken as descriptions of relations between unconverted individuals; although I must add that Sartre did give some hints of that in *Being and Nothingness*, hints that almost none of his contemporaries caught.⁵⁴ Once the latter's *Notebooks for an Ethics* were published, seven years after Marcel's death and three after

Sartre's, it was abundantly clear that he, like Marcel, believed that positive human relations (such as authentic love and generosity) were not only possible but absolutely necessary for human beings to have meaningful lives.

Still, while both men are in agreement about the importance of human love, I should note that there is an important difference between the two men's understanding of the bond of love. For Sartre the unity of lovers occurs only in will and action, that is, lovers choose and act for each other's well being. A real ontological bond between them is impossible. For Marcel, human love does consist of a real union between the lovers, a oneness which is spiritual in nature for it unites the subjects together at the same time that it respects and enhances the integrity and well being of each of them.

God

I will conclude by addressing the most profound disagreement between Sartre and Marcel—the reality of God.

A. *Sartre's position:* Actually, the atheistic existentialist does not spend much time attempting to prove that God does not exist. His argument is basically that the very idea of God is self-contradictory, but that, of course, depends entirely on what he means by God. Technically, Sartre defines God as an impossible combination of being-for-itself and being-in-itself. God would be a being that is conscious and free on the one hand, which he calls "nonbeing" since it is the polar opposite of being-in-itself, combined with the total fullness of being-in-itself on the other. Since being for itself, free human consciousness, is defined as a lack or nothingness of being, it can not survive if it combines with being in itself which is a complete fullness of being.⁵⁵

Sartre also defines God as an *ens causa sui*, a being what would freely cause itself to be necessary or, to put it another way, a being which makes itself necessary by freely conferring on itself a right to be. However, Sartre argues that in order to cause itself to be necessary, God must first (ontologically not temporally) be and so the God-cause at the origin of God-caused would not itself be caused but be contingent and unnecessary. Thus he writes, "God if he exists [as *causa sui*] is contingent."⁵⁶ But a contingent being cannot cause itself to be necessary for the idea of a being which is both contingent and necessary is self-contradictory.

Needless to say, if one does not accept Sartre's division of reality into being-for itself and being-in-itself, and as we saw in Section I Marcel does not, and does not consider the impossible combination of them to be God, and Marcel does not, Sartre's reasoning is not convincing. Likewise, if one does not accept *ens causa sui* as a definition of God, and Marcel does not, Sartre's argument that such a God is impossible is irrelevant.

In my opinion, Sartre's more cogent and challenging reasons for denying God's existence are found in his attack on the traditional notion of God as the creator of all that is. He argues that there are only two ways to understand creation and neither of them make sense.⁵⁷ Either God creates something remains within his being and then it is not a creature which possesses own existence, and so it simply "dissolves" in its creator. Or God creates something which is truly "distinct from and opposed to its creator" but then it possesses its own "being beyond the creation." Such a being, truly distinct its creator, Sartre states, "is its own support, it does not preserve the trace of divine creation." In other words, he denies the possibility that could create a creature truly distinct or separate from himself whose would remain totally and continuously dependent on him. That is the Sartre claims that the theory of perpetual creation, namely, the view a creature is continuously created at each moment of its existence, removes all substantiality or independence of that creature from its creator.⁵⁸ Again, if God creates something that is continuously dependent on him every moment of its being, then that created thing can not be really separate or distinct from its creator. Apparently, in Sartre's eyes a creature must be *completely* independent of its creator for it to have its own being distinct from that creator.

But why couldn't something be created to be distinct from its creator at the same time that its being is totally dependent on its creator? Sartre suggests another argument based on passivity and activity.⁵⁹ If a being continually receives *all* that it is from a creator, that makes it *totally* passive in relation to its creator. However, a being that is totally passive does not even exercise its own particular existence. For something to be in itself a being really separate and distinct from its creator, it has to have and to exercise its own existence, it cannot just be part of the creator's existence. But if it assumes and exercises its own being and thus actually is distinct from its creator's being, then it cannot be totally passive and so cannot be

created. Sartre cannot see how a creature that receives everything that it is at every moment can possess any intrinsic independence or reality of its own in relation to its creator.

B. *Marcel's alternative*: I use the term alternative here rather than criticism because Marcel does not directly address any of Sartre's arguments against creation. In fact, he too has serious reservations about the traditional understanding of creation, in particular its use of the category of causality to explain God's production of creatures. He seems to consider causality to involve a determined relation between physical objects; a cause is a physical entity which transmits a certain power or force that modifies another physical entity.⁶⁰ Yet he recognizes that physical powers are not the only kind of powers human beings experience. We speak of the power of truth, the power of art, the power of love, and it is in terms of that last power that Marcel tries to explain the nature of Divine creation.

He suggests that we view the relation between a creator God and creatures not in terms of causality but as the bestowing of a gift. That is, the creator is not a first cause but a loving father whose creatures are his freely offered gifts. To call creatures gifts is to say that they are neither deserved, nor required, nor necessitated. Their reality is bestowed freely, gratuitously, and generously by infinite love.⁶¹ And he attempts to understand creation out of love by reflecting on our experience of human love. As we saw in Section IV, Marcel's description of human love reveals that it is a power, in the sense that it has real effects on the loved one and the lover, yet it is not a power which tries to dominate or control the beloved. Love respects the beloved and seeks to enhance his or her being. When I realize I am loved, I experience that I am not a solitary individual doomed to search alone for a meaningful life. I have companions, friends, lovers who value me and join with me to support my search for fulfillment and happiness. Another's love refreshes me and renews my energy; it may empower me to attempt to attain goals I would never have the courage to attempt on my own. It may reveal and strengthen dimensions of myself (e.g. my gentleness, my kindness, my commitment and perseverance) that I hardly realized I possessed. Most especially, another's love of me reveals that I possess value, that my life has significance beyond what I alone can give it.

Yet at the same time that love affects the beloved in the ways just mentioned, love also respects the integrity of the beloved. As we

noted above, Marcel believes that love is a spiritual union between lover and beloved. The lover identifies his or her self with the beloved and participates in his or her life and experiences. And such participation does not absorb or destroy the beloved but respects the beloved as he or she is—after all, it is he or she that I love. My love seeks to promote the other. It is the beloved's well-being and happiness that I seek and join with my own.

Accordingly, to view creative love as analogous to human love, as Marcel does, is to view God as a loving father whose all powerful love wills all things into being and at the same time voluntarily withholds itself for the good of its creatures. Just as human love seeks the well being of the beloved, absolute creative love respects the gifts it bestows and seeks their good, even to the point of allowing human freedom to reject that love and its gifts.

C. *Sartre's response:* Sartre never directly addresses Marcel's notion of creation. However, as we saw in the previous section, in his *Notebooks* he does describe generosity and authentic love as both respecting others and as assisting them in attaining their goals. In *The Family Idiot* the love of others is a power which is essential for us to fulfill our needs and live a meaningful life; it is not a power which diminishes our freedom but one which enhances it. Sartre does not pursue this beyond the human realm, although he does speak of our religious instinct which is a desire deep within us for a meaning for our lives that would make us essential to something or someone that is absolute. We desire a justification for our lives, he says, that could come only from an almighty, infinite being who created us for some purpose in his grand design. One very interesting feature of our need for a creator in Sartre's last work is that it does not appear to be identical to the earlier desire to *be* God which he described in *Being and Nothingness*. The religious instinct is described as a need for justification and meaning given by a loving creator, not a need to be a creator who is cause of itself. Of course Sartre's atheism has no room for any God and so our religious instinct cannot be satisfied. Still, since he acknowledges our complete dependence on the love of others for our fulfillment and also recognizes that that love is not inimical to our freedom and our flourishing, he has less reason to be suspicious of a God like Marcel's who creates entirely out of love.

One final remark. I trust that this paper has made it clear that most of Marcel's criticisms of Sartre's views apply only to the latter's

early ontology set forth primarily in *Being and Nothingness*. It may be that those criticisms were a stimulus for some of the changes Sartre made in that ontology. In any case, one thing is certain, Marcel was dead wrong when he wrote in 1946 that Sartre would never “put forth the heroic effort ...required for a serious reconsideration” of his early views and that “his views will harden still further.”⁶² Whatever one thinks of Sartre, I believe he must be given a great deal of credit for having the courage to reconsider and revise his views, sometimes radically, as he continued to acquire greater insight into the human condition.

Notes

1. “Existentialism” in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. B. Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 13 [hereafter EH]. Actually, Marcel always repudiated that designation. See his *Awakenings*, trans. P. Rogers (Milwaukee: Marquette U. Press, 2(02), 39. It is interesting to note that according to Simone de Beauvoir, it was Marcel who first applied the term existentialist to Sartre and herself. See her work, *The Prime of Life*, trans. P. Green (Cleveland: World Pub. Co, 1962), 433-35.
2. *Awakenings*, 102, 188; Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstances*, trans. R. Howard (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1964), 66-67; Van Ewijk, Thomas, *Gabriel Marcel*, trans. M. Van Velzen (Glen Rock, N.J: Paulist Press, 1965), 23; Lamblin, B, *A Disgraceful Affair*, trans. J. Plovnick (Boston: Northeastern U. Press, 1993), 50.
3. *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. M. Harari (New York: Citadel Press, 1963), 47, 53, 62, 67-69, 71 [hereafter PE].
4. *Awakenings*, 187-89.
5. *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) [hereafter, BN]. Its subtitle is, “An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology” and it contains many references to Husserl and to phenomenology.
6. BN, lv-lix.
7. BN, lxiii-lxvi.
8. BN, lxxv-lxxvi; 174-76.
9. BN, 174.

10. BN, 441. See also, BN, 435-441, 509, 520, 530-31, 549, 555. In these texts Sartre frequently identifies consciousness, the for itself, and man or human reality.
11. *Metaphysical Journal*, trans. B. Wall (Chicago: Gateway, 1952), xi-xii [hereafter MJ]; *Homo Viator*, trans. E. Crauford (New York: Harper, 1962), 167-171 [hereafter HV]; *The Mystery of Being I*, trans. G. Fraser (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 144-46 [hereafter MB, I]; PE 69.
12. *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. P. McCormick & S. Jolin (Evanston: Northwestern U. Press, 1973), 38 [hereafter TWB]. See also MB, I, 133-35.
13. HV, 183; PE, 90.
14. *Critique of Dialectical Reason, I*, trans A. Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 1991), Introduction [hereafter CDR].
15. CDR I, 232, 331. For more detail see my *Sartre's Two Ethics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), Chapter 6.
16. A couple of Sartre's most notable critics were Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 346 and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), Part III, Chapter 3.
17. BN, 626-27.
18. BN, 627.
19. EH, 22.
20. BN, 38.
21. BN, Part Two, Chapter One, section III.
22. MB, II, 92.
23. *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G Fraser (Chicago: Regnery, 1962), 171 [hereafter MAMS].
24. The material which follows is based on: MB, I, 79-84,150-157; *Creative Fidelity*, trans. R. Rosthal (New York: Fordham U. Press, 2002), chapters 6 and 8 [hereafter CF].
25. PE, 87.
26. Lecture given in Rome, May 1964 at the Gramsci Institute now available at the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, 41, 65, 69 and 72. [hereafter RL]. All translations are my own.

27. RL, 100. See also, RL, 97-98.
28. RL, 67, 98,145.
29. Ibid.
30. Since even to date only a very small portion of the Rome lecture has been published, there was no way that Marcel could have been aware of it and of Sartre's second ethics.
31. MB, II, 79-82; CF, 136-37, 167; MAMS, 258. For more detail see my book, *A Commentary on Gabriel Marcel's 'The Mystery of Being'* (Milwaukee: Marquette U. Press, 2006), 128-36.
32. BN, 84-91, 615, 626.
33. BN, 627.
34. PE, 84; TWB, 165.
35. PE. 84-86, 89; HV, 183.
36. EH, 49
37. *Notebooks for an Ethics*; trans. D. Pellauer (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992), 479, 559-60 [hereafter NE]. Conversion was briefly mentioned in BN (412n, 464) and Sartre indicated that it could change the goal of human existence and the character of human relationships.
38. NE, 17, 103, 138, 143, 165-66, 388, 393-98, 471.
39. *The Family Idiot*, trans. C. Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), I, 567 [hereafter FI]. See also, FI, 496-99, 520-21, 542-49, 555-60.
40. FI, I, 134; FI, II, 413, FI, IV, 264.
41. BN, 364, 429.
42. BN, 244.
43. BN, 257, 262-67, 271-73.
44. BN, 429.
45. PE, 71; HV, 177.
46. PE, 74-76.
47. MAMS 162, 168. See also, HV, 176-77 and MB, 1,177-82.
48. CF, 34-35, 99; MB, I, 182.

49. PE, 83, 88; MAMS, 168, 217-218. I should point out that in CDR Sartre explicitly says that he is a materialist: CDR, I, 29, 180-81.
50. NE, 418, 500.
51. NE, 9, 20, 499.
52. NE, 49, 126-27, 280-82, 288, 418, 502-08.
53. FI, I, 129, 133-35.
54. BN, 412n and the 3 page introduction to his treatment of human relations, 361-63, where he says that those relations are to be understood as attempts to use or destroy others in order to become God.
55. BN, 90
56. BN, 80-81.
57. BN, lxiv
58. BN, lxiv.
59. BN, lvi, lviii, lxiv.
60. *Problematic Man*, trans. B. Thompson (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 54-55, 58-60; *MI*, 35.
61. MB, II, 118-21; CF, 34-37.
62. PE, 90.