

GABRIEL MARCEL AND THE QUESTION OF HUMAN DIGNITY

MARIÁN PALENČÁR

Abstract: This article explores the concept of human dignity in the work of French philosopher Gabriel Marcel. It demonstrates how this lesser-known aspect of his philosophical thinking is organic to his work and draws attention to the current relevance of the way he resolves the question of human dignity for philosophy and ethics. The first part of the article looks at the basic ideas behind Marcel's understanding of man as a being on the road, as unfinished, temporal, in the process of becoming, and creatively open on the road of transcendence to the mystery of being. This is followed by an explanation of Marcel's criticism of the traditional understanding of human dignity (on both the social and ontological levels), which has degenerated into the formalism. Criticizing this rationalist (Kantian) conception of dignity as a particular kind of power, Gabriel Marcel produces an original conception of existential dignity as weakness—the fragile vulnerable finitude of the human individual. But it is an active weakness/finitude that lies in the ability of the individual to creatively resist attempts to humiliate him and in his effort to recognize his unique human values. Part of this finitude, on the inter-subjective level, is an encounter with the neighbour in love, which is a service to others in defence of man's weakness. The author draws attention to the fact that Marcel's conception of human dignity has been partially accepted in philosophy, ethics and bioethics.

Key words: philosophy of existence; ethics; Gabriel Marcel; human dignity; finitude; creativity; sanctity; love.

French philosopher, dramatist, theater and literary critic and music composer Gabriel (Honoré) Marcel (1889–1973) is primarily known among experts and the general public for his work on Christian Existentialism or as the creator of the Philosophy of Hope. However, his name is less associated with the issue of human dignity. The main aim of this paper is to introduce this almost forgotten aspect of his work. We will attempt to show that the theme of dignity is not accidental but organic to his work. We wish to highlight the relevance of Marcel's understanding of the true meaning of dignity to contemporary philosophy and ethics. But first we will outline the basic concepts in his philosophy before moving on to further considerations.

As mentioned above, Gabriel Marcel is known as a Christian Existentialist. This label was given to him by J.-P. Sartre in his popular lecture *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* 1946¹.

¹ As Sartre writes: “... there are two kinds of existentialists: on one hand, the Christians, among whom I would include Carl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both professed Catholics; and, on the other, the

Although Marcel initially accepted it², from 1949 on he became increasingly sceptical of it, finally rejecting it in 1951 as inappropriate for his philosophy.³ Later, he favoured the terms Neosocratism and Christian Socratism or even Concrete Philosophy⁴. These all express a key feature of his philosophizing—openness to the life experience of a human individual.

The fact that Marcel's thinking was programmatically anti-systematic does not mean that unity cannot be found in the background of his work. Despite the “deep wells of thought (Fr. *forage*)” under the surface of the life experiences he generally explored in his fragmentary diary notes and short journal articles, he successively seeks such a unity, when he presents his thought invariants⁵. These invariants lie in the thematisation of questions through pairs of bipolar terms. Russian philosopher V. P. Vizgin produced a table consisting of nineteen such opposites and does not consider it finished (Vizgin, 2004, pp. 202-203). Briefly here are the most well-known: *to have – to be, problem – mystery, primary reflection – secondary reflection, object / thing – existence, visible – invisible, opinion – faith, desire – hope*.

However, these pairs do not exist in isolation from one another—the tension between the content reveals a different perspective (correlative and tied to the others) on the same thing—the human condition, the *conditio humana* of a person. The second term in the pair expresses a more valuable and ontologically higher and better reality than the first. In what follows, we will summarize Marcel's understanding of human existence, using the first three “basic”

atheistic existentialists, among whom we should place Heidegger, as well as the French existentialists and myself” (Sartre, 2007, p. 20). In the same year, in his *Introduction aux existentialismes*, E. Mounier placed Marcel's thinking within the branch of existentialisms rather than existentialism (see Mounier, 1948, p.3).

² See Gilson, E. (Ed.) (1947).

³ In an interview with P. Ricoeur he states: “In fact I have never spontaneously used the word ‘existentialism’ (Conversations Gabriel Marcel, 2017, p. 9), if I have, it was just from some ‘docility’.” (Conversations Gabriel Marcel, 2017, p. 10) Marcel rejected the term *existentialism* not only because he thought its use and polarizaton had led to “misunderstanding and stupidity” (see Marcel 1995, p. 25), but also because of more serious reasons related to the nature of his philosophy. Like Heidegger, he did not agree with Sartre's thesis that “existence precedes essence” nor with the resulting “devaluation of the essence” (see Bendlová, 2003, p. 30), or his understanding of freedom, radical atheism and amongst others. According to Marcel, the core of Sartre's philosophy was “... the Luciferian refusal with which a rebellious individuality, intoxicated with itself spurns the signs ...” (Marcel, 1951a, p. 184). His most general objection was to the point: “... more generally that I'm repelled by labels and ‘isms’” (Conversations Gabriel Marcel, 2017, p. 9). The point is that Marcel's philosophy “is essentially unsystematic, or even programmatically anti-systematic” (Bendlová, 1998, p. 105). Yet, it should be added that Marcel also objected to the first part of Sartre's label - to the adjective *Christian*. He considered himself to be “a philosopher of the threshold, a philosopher who kept himself in rather uncomfortable fashion on a line midway between believers and nonbelievers ...” (Conversations Gabriel Marcel, 2017, p. 11).

⁴ In the preface to the first part of the French edition of *The Mystery of Being* (1951) Marcel writes that despite being firmly opposed to “isms” if he had to “... agree with finding some sort of the label, then ... he would finally choose Neosocratism, or Christian Socratism” (Quoted by Marcel, 1995, p. 25). On the nature of this latter, Concrete Philosophy, see his *Essai de Philosophie Concrète*. Paris: Gallimard, 1967.

⁵ The “most systematic” interpretation of his views is considered to be his *The Mystery of Being*. Vol. 1, 1950 and vol. 2, 1951, in which Marcel reflects on the majority of them. See also Le Maitre (1951); Gutting (2002, p. 99).

opposites—to have and to be, problem and mystery, primary and secondary reflection. Before doing that though, we will try to explain the term *Homo Viator* as a premise which will help us understand the deeper unity of these opposites.

Marcel chose to use the term *Homo Viator* in the prologue to his book with the same title⁶, when he was considering what to call “... Ariadne’s thread, guiding the reader through the labyrinth ... formed by these essays” (Marcel, 1951, p. 7; see *motto*). We believe that this term is appropriate not only to his series of essays, but is also a methodological tool for understanding the nature of his work⁷ and his conception of man. *Homo Viator* is man, in the substantial sense of word, *on the way*, an unfinished being, temporal, in the process of becoming, and creatively open.⁸ He progresses from a lower level (possession, attitude and the use of primary reflection to solve problems) to a higher level (where the mystery of being is “revealed” during secondary reflection). We will explain a fundamental dimension of this road will be explained with reference to the content of the opposites to have and to be.

Marcel states that the meaning of this pair is crucial to understanding human existence: “Everything really comes down to the distinction between what we have and what we are” (Marcel, 1949, p. 155). When talking of *possession*, he says

what we have obviously presents an appearance of externality to ourselves. ...In principle, what we have are things (or what can be compared to things...)⁹....I can only have, in the strict sense of the word, something whose existence is, up to a certain point, independent of me (Marcel, 1949, p. 155).

While “...I only have what I can in some manner and within certain limits dispose of...” (Marcel, 1949, p. 155). Possessing things ultimately satisfies my needs, but the fact that the things I own can be lost or destroyed in this accidental world causes anxiety (Marcel, 1949, p. 162). Moreover, things that are owned tend to suppress the owner. The direction of control is reversed. Controlled becomes controlling (Marcel, 1949, pp. 164-165).

If we also recognize that “*To have* can ... chiefly mean, *to have for one’s-self*, to keep for one’s-self, to hide” (Marcel, 1949, p. 160) and that “the statement ‘I have’ can only be made over against *another* which is felt to be other” (Marcel, 1949, p. 161), the world of possession appears to be a world full of alienation, not only are individuals alienated from the world but they are alienated from each other. It is true that the real “problem” concerning *to have* arises only when we begin to consider (and live) it as the only possible way of human existence, when its “ontological sense” or “sense of being” becomes blunt and lost (Marcel, 1998, p. 173) and “ontological deficiency” appears (Marcel, 1949, p. 174).

⁶ See Marcel, 1951.

⁷ In this sense we can agree with W. Janke that “Marcel’s thinking does not produce a final solution, but raises questions” (Janke, 1995, p. 160). (See also Tarnowski, 1995, p. 11).

⁸ H. Bergson’s influence can be seen here.

⁹ To things, objects, to something we do not participate in. In this sense we have (as we usually believe) a body—“The body is a typical possession” (Marcel, 1949, p. 163), as are opinions, characteristics and so on.

To have is more complex (than *to be*) when we peer through the lens of its, seemingly praxeological (*problem-mystery*) and epistemological (*primary-secondary reflection*), parallel. According to Marcel:

... the realm of having is identical with the realm of the problematic¹⁰—and at the same time ... with the realm where technic can be used. ... Every technic presupposes a group of previously made abstractions which are the condition of its working; it is powerless full-blooded Being is in question. ... At the root of having, as also at the root of the problem or the technic,¹¹ there lies a certain specialization or specification of the self, and this is connected with that partial alienation of the self ... (Marcel, 1949, p. 172).

This specialization leads to the fact that an individual begins to appear to himself and to others as a cluster of unrelated functions (biological, social, psychological).¹² In the world of problems a man as a whole person, his existence, is forgotten, “suspended”.¹³ This fully correlates with the fact that behind “to have” and also in the world of problems lies the *primary reflection* epistemological approach, based on the thinking operations of isolation and analysis, leading to the formation of objective characteristics and abstract generalizations.¹⁴ In thrall to possession, problems and primary reflection, one lives in a chaotic, *broken world* (*Le Monde cassé* is the name of one of Marcel’s plays)—one is “diversed”¹⁵ in a senseless, empty, or even desperate world of discrete multiplicity.

Man as *Homo Viator* can (and indeed should) emerge from this decayed, broken world, so he can revive and implement the suppressed ontological exigence, the need to be (Marcel, 1998, pp. 172, 175).¹⁶ The essential feature of this transition is constant transcendence. “In

¹⁰ “A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, ... But a mystery is something in which I myself am 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” (Marcel, 1950, p. 211). A problem has a unique solution, but there is no such answer to a mystery.

¹¹ “A genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined; whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends every conceivable technique” (Marcel, 1950, p. 211).

¹² In a mass technocratic society he is degraded to the tool of these functions. See Marcel, 1998, pp. 173-174.

¹³ “Wherever a problem is found, I am working upon data placed before me; but at the same time, the general state of affairs authorizes me to carry on as if I had no need to trouble Myself with this Me who is at work: he is here simply presupposed. It is, ... quite a different matter when the inquiry is about Being. Here the ontological status of the questioner becomes” (Marcel, 1949, p. 171).

¹⁴ The following applies: “... that ... primary reflection tends to dissolve the unity of experience which is first put before it ...” (Marcel, 1950, p. 83). It exerts a sharp separation between man and the world, body and mind, and people from themselves.

¹⁵ Pascal’s concept of *diversion* (Fr. *divertissement*) has a different meaning in Marcel’s philosophy. Pascal ironically emphasizes misery of man who is without diversion. “For, though he is king, he is unhappy when he thinks about himself” (Pascal, 2004, 136; p. 39). As for Marcel the true state of diversion in the world is inauthentic and the specific focus on the self is authentic.

¹⁶ Ontological exigence presents humans with a challenge, it is a task to be carried out. A person who does not accept this exigence, is actually not yet a person, that person is a commitment that must be fulfilled. Therefore, the following applies: “... I am not, I have to become”, and “... I am not free, I have to become free (Marcel, 1963, p. 88).

this sense, it is no doubt true that, strictly speaking, only those beings who are entirely free from the shackles of ownership in all its forms are able to know the divine light-heartedness of life in hope" (Marcel, 1951, p. 61).¹⁷

According to G. Marcel, carrying out ontological exigence in human life is not simple. Rather than a walk down the road it is an overgrown field that must be constantly grubbed out and plowed (Maryniarczyk, 2013, p. 31). It is, in the final result, the hard way of "the tragic pilgrim to the mystery of being on the road illuminated by hope".¹⁸ And secondary reflection plays the central role on this hard way. If primary reflection shatters the original unity of our experience, "the function of secondary reflection is essentially recuperative; it reconquers that unity"¹⁹ (Marcel, 1998, p. 183). The supreme performance of the secondary reflection is recollection (Fr. *recueillement*)²⁰, "... the act whereby I collect myself as a unity..." (Marcel, 1998, p.181). In this internal process of self-finding and self-restoration we find ourselves "... beyond all possible judgments, and, I will add, beyond any possible representation" (Marcel, 1998, p. 182). This process of self-finding is, however, mysteriously paradoxical. At the same time, "... the self into which I return ceases precisely to that extent to belong to itself" (Marcel, 1998, p. 182) and "this gathering together, this concentration is also a relaxation, a letting go. It involves *abandoning to...*, *relaxing in the presence of...*, without it being possible for me to specify in any way the substantive reality that these prepositions refer to. The path stops at the threshold..." (Marcel, 1998, p. 181) We could probably interpret this final, rather mysterious statement by Marcel through his (as yet still vague) understanding of a human being who is not „... *sum*, but *sursum*” (Marcel, 1951c, p. 26). And the *sursum* opens up a space for another person²¹ because Marcel's *esse* is always simultaneously *coesse* (Marcel, 1998, p. 191), the seat of intersubjectivity and love.

We will try, in the context of the above, to outline Marcel's philosophy and to explain his understanding of human dignity.

The concept of human dignity is not new, but it is ever more urgently required by humankind.²² So much so, that over the last seven decades human dignity (along with human

¹⁷ This, however, does not mean for man an ascetic escape from this world, man's absolute denial of possession. Possession is a part of life, but its role should not be hypertrophied. Moreover, as Marcel writes in the annex to *Avoir et être* (1991) "our being is constituted only by the transmutation from the form of ownership" (1991, p. 186; cited by P. Bendlová, 1998, p. 113; cf. also Marcel, 1949, p. 165).

¹⁸ See Bendlová, 1988, p.105.

¹⁹ Unity of man and world, body and mind and people with one another.

²⁰ This concept may be, as Marcel writes, difficult to define, but it remains a mystery (Marcel, 1998, p. 182). However, it appears to be the opposite of diversion.

²¹ And for *others* generally.

²² The initial motivation behind the interest in this subject was the human rights violations and crimes against humanity committed by the Nazis against civilians during World War II. Later, it became of interest again in relation to some of the value-controversial consequences of bio-technological developments in health and medicine. It would seem that the synergistic interplay between economic, technical, political and socio-cultural changes in modern and postmodern society is generating both new and old forms of human alienation.

rights) has not only become part of the permanent agenda of practical politics,²³ but also a research subject in the humanities (jurisprudence, philosophy, ethics, theology, political science, psychology and others) and also medicine and nursing.²⁴ At the same time, however, the concept of human dignity has been problematised and rejected: for its specieicism, its religious character and for its internal inconsistency and vagueness.²⁵ Marcel was also critical of the prevalent understanding of human dignity, but his attitude was not nihilistic. He did not reject the very notion of human dignity but tried to re-formulate²⁶ it from the position of the philosophy of existence. To clarify his thinking on this subject, we will explain the essence of the “traditional” concept of (human) dignity which he did not accept.

Dignity, in the most general sense, is usually understood to be a specific value an entity has, or that is attributed to him.²⁷ Everyday language use would suggest that this entity is human (related to humans). Therefore, things (and organisms) can have values, but only man has the value we call dignity.²⁸ The particularity of this value is associated most often with the concepts of *status / rank* of man (Waldron, 2012). This is historically linked to “... an elevated standing of something over something else” (Sensen, 2011, p. 154). Thus, it is also linked to a certain hierarchisation and, in this sense, with power as well, because “in virtue of this rank one have certain powers and privileges ...” (Sensen, 2011, p. 153; see also Waldron, 2012, p. 30 ff.).

This means that dignity as a power is most visible in *social status/ rank*, usually based on some capabilities and the merit attributed to an individual (group) by the community. A socioculturally specified status is one whereby an individual (group)²⁹ has certain (specific) socially expected (and desired) competencies (capabilities, qualities) which attract (or should attract) the recognition, respect (and submission in certain areas of social life) of other members of society. For the same reason a “dignified” subject is expected to behave appropriately—he should fulfil his commitments.

This “social dignity” is variable—an individual can obtain, lose it and gain it to varying degrees, and it is also conditioned by circumstances (place, time and evaluator). Moreover, it is about fulfilling specific characteristics and having the required capabilities and competencies. But in what lies human dignity, the dignity of man as such? Based on what

²³ This can be seen in the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* by the UN General Assembly in 1948 and later the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966), or the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and and Cultural Rights* (1966) and others.

²⁴ See also Čáp, Palenčár, & Kurucová (2016); Düwell, Braarvig, Brownsword, & Mieth (Eds.) (2014); McGradden (Ed.) (2014).

²⁵ See also Čáp, Palenčár, & Kurucová (2016), chiefly p. 38 ff; Gluchman (2012); Macklin (2003); Pinker (2008); Rachels (1990); Singer (1986); Skinner (1976); Waldron (2014).

²⁶ See Venter (2002, pp. 351-352).

²⁷ See also Sulmasy (2013, p. 937); Wainwright & Galagher (2008, p. 47) and others.

²⁸ These do not exclude existing efforts to attribute the value of dignity to some nonhuman organisms (as enacted e.g. in the Swiss Institute of 1992—see Schaber, 2014, p. 546), or to post-human beings (see Bostrom, 2006).

²⁹ It is a judge’s responsibility to resolve disputes between people (institutions) fairly and according to the law, a doctor is supposed to heal the ill professionally and with a human approach, a president should be able to solve problems with statesmanlike wisdom and so on.

capabilities and qualities does man³⁰ have or will obtain solidity and power? The historically prevailing response, rooted in Cicero at least,³¹ is, simply put, reason. In this sense reason is, synonymous with dignity as power.³²

Marcel's criticism of the way dignity is understood rejects the above mentioned rationalist paradigm in Kant's embodiment both on the social and ontological levels. He states

We must admit that in current phraseology what is called the dignity of the human being is described in terms of Kantism (here, by the way, reduced to its simplest expression). We refer to the idea according to which the inalienable value of man lies in the fact that he is a rational being, that stress is placed on his faculty of understanding and comprehending the intelligible order of the world, or rather on his faculty of conforming to certain maxims considered as universally valid (Marcel, 1963, p. 128).³³

However, Marcel thought this rationalism had lost its vitality and degenerated into pure formalism (Marcel, 1963, p. 128) because thinking is, in certain circumstances, "... able to descend and alienate dignity, that is principally its own" (Marcel, 1965, p. 53). We come to what Marcel called (in Bergson style) spirit of abstraction that is adequate to the form *to have* and is produced by the *primary reflection*. According to Marcel what is relevant here is that

... this spirit of abstraction cannot be separated from a certain lack of love, and by this I mean the inability to treat a human being as a human being, and for this human being the substituting of a certain idea, a certain abstract designation... (Marcel, 1963, p. 123).

Such an abstract, or ideological, approach³⁴ identifies man with what he *has* (qualities, abilities, and other characteristics, moreover in abstraction—since he is like all other men), and not with what he *is*—his uniqueness, openness and creativity.³⁵ It reifies and “massifies” him. Marcel illustrates this contrast using the two characters in his play *Le Dard (The Sting)* (Eustach and Werner), which is about "... two different or even opposite conceptions of man and of his essential dignity" (Marcel, 1963, p. 117). Professor Eustach judges "... others, not on their intrinsic qualities but according to the category into which they fall" (Marcel, 1963,

³⁰ No longer just a judge, doctor, statesman.

³¹ Cicero writes in this regard "... our being all alike endowed with reason and with that superiority which lifts us above the brute. From this all morality and propriety are derived, and upon it depends the rational method of ascertaining our duty" (Cicero, 1928, I, 30; p. 109).

³² According to Waldron "... our modern concept of human dignity retains ... the footstep of its ancient and historical interdependency with rank ..." (Waldron, 2012, p. 14).

³³ For Kant, it is the autonomy of a rational being, enshrined in morality that is essential to human dignity. He said: "Hence autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature" (Kant, 1981, p. 41/436). In this context we are talking about "... the dignity of rational being who obeys no law except what he at the same time enacts himself" (Kant, 1981, p. 40/434).

³⁴ Marcel regarded it as the greatest poverty, the leprosy of the modern era. (Marcel, 1963, p. 122).

³⁵ Marcel spoke of "its most terrifying though not its only incarnation in communism", a reference to a concrete individual but only through class categories (as a representative of the class). Capitalist technocracy makes the same mistake "when it goes so far as to consider the individual within the framework of society as a mere unit of production ..." (Marcel, 1963, p. 123).

p. 120).³⁶ By contrast, it is the singer Werner who provides musical enjoyment to the others without any ideological barriers, no matter who they are. He does not differentiate between the right ones (strong, worthy of respect) and the wrong ones (weak); he does not prioritize or segregate. Behind every person he sees a human, his message is universal, based on love (Marcel, 1963, pp. 119-120).

According to Marcel, the ideological understanding of dignity that isolates humans, separates and encloses them in an “ossified” world on the basis of abstract schemes and categories, over time degrades to mere pomp while respect degrades to adulation (Marcel, 1965, p. 54). Dignity becomes merely *decorative* (ornamental),³⁷ it is only pretending (Marcel, 1965, p. 57), and behind that there is power, an expression of the distance between people, between “men entrusted with high duties and ordinary people” (Marcel, 1963, p. 129).³⁸

Marcel’s criticism of the rationalist understanding of human dignity is not only found in the above, and in many ways, negative attitude. As we have already mentioned, he also gives specifically existential and content contributive re-interpretations of this concept. For methodological reasons, we will focus on the two fundamental, interconnected dimensions of dignity. The first is the seemingly independent individual dimension of dignity with its emphasis on creativity and the second is its intersubjective dimension, because, as we know, for Marcel, man’s asset is not *esse*, but *coesse* (Marcel, 1988, p. 191).

In particular, as the counterweight to the prevailing spirit of abstraction, Marcel wants to restore to human experience “its ontological weight” (Marcel, 1963 p. 75),³⁹ which means that the dignity shall be sought “at the antipodes of pretension⁴⁰ and rather on the side of weakness (Marcel, 1963, p. 134).⁴¹

It is my own profound belief that we cannot succeed in preserving the mysterious principle at the heart of human dignity unless we succeed in making explicit the properly sacral quality⁴² peculiar to it, a quality which will appear all the more clearly when we consider the human being in his nudity and weakness—the human being as helpless, as the child, the old man, or the pauper (Marcel, 1963, p. 128).

Here his weakness, or fragility, as opposed to solidity, is an indispensable component of human experience, ignored by the decayed rationalism. Seeing the dignity in its weakness /

³⁶ Eustach has developed class consciousness, hence his “... opinion and every judgment ... is inspired by his desire to remain in line with a certain class ideology” (Marcel, 1963, p. 119), which Marcel considers to be the result of guilty conscience (Marcel, 1963, p. 119). For Werner, Eustach likes Beethoven only because “... he ascribes to the German composer a democratic ideology very similar to his own” (Marcel, 1963, p. 120) and not because of his work.

³⁷ In another context, Marcel uses the term *affectée dignité* (stilted, unnatural dignity), which we regard as synonymous with the previous one.

³⁸ This is especially “showy” in the case of judges and priests (see Marcel, 1965, p. 54 ff.).

³⁹ Cf. Venter (2002, p. 359).

⁴⁰ I.e. seeming solidity, strength and power.

⁴¹ *Human dignity in weakness* – is the title of the first part of the J. J. Venter essay on this theme (Venter, 2002).

⁴² As we will show later, in his writing Marcel reiterates the affinity between dignity and sanctity.

fragility means realizing that man is a finite being, because “fragility in this case is nothing more than a kind of expression of some finitude” (Marcel, 1965, p. 58). Restoring ontological weight to human experience is therefore first and foremost about restoring ontological weight to human finitude, whose fragility is only one aspect, in addition to vulnerability and mortality (Marcel, 1965, pp. 59, 61).

Marcel, however, is not satisfied with this solution and asks: How could “finitude itself... enforce something like respect?” (Marcel, 1965, p. 58, see also Marcel, 1963). It is only the argument about mortality that is to be found behind nihilism, disparaging the value of the individual, or behind various forms of collectivism that see man’s value only in an inevitable fusion of a super-individual (immortal?) unit (class, state)⁴³ (Marcel, 1963, p. 136 ff.; Marcel, 1965, pp. 61-62, 64). On the other hand, even power alone does not initiate respect, just admiration (Marcel, 1965, p. 58). Marcel’s solution to this question is “dialectical” because he sees a contrast or inner tension within “finitude” itself. He acknowledges that fragility cannot initiate respect on its own, “respect comes only from a certain [paradoxical] combination of power and fragility” (Marcel, 1965, p. 58). In this regard he rejects Kant’s dualism, in which reason / thinking = spontaneity = activity and sensuality / sensitivity = receptivity = passivity, and points out that insofar as inactivity by the weak is concerned, we should realize that their receptivity is not passive, but active, creative (Marcel, 1963, p. 126). Because “... in reality any creation is a response to a call received” (Marcel, 1963, p. 126), and the ability to feel (sensitivity) and the ability to create differ in intensity not substance (Marcel, 1963, p. 127).⁴⁴

Marcel illustrates this concept of weakness (Marcel, 1965, p. 56) using the example of a statesman whose initial estimates were wrong, but who later changed his view and publicly admitted his mistake. Despite his weakness (mistake) we feel respect towards him. But in this case we are not talking about dignity in the sense of the traditional solidity and stability of attitudes and opinions.

What in this case initiates respect? Surely, this is not the change of views itself. It is a kind of honesty [and courage, as Marcel adds below], it is a refusal to strike a pose at any price, it is a distance taken to a certain image of myself that one would like to keep spontaneously” (Marcel, 1965, p. 57).

It is in fact the act of overcoming the captivity in the realm *to have* and transitioning into the realm *to be*. And there, in the individual’s courage to realize and admit his weakness,

⁴³ Venter suggests that behind Marcel’s anti-collectivist opinion lies his resistance to Mussolini’s totalitarianism and statism (see Venter, 2002, p. 366), since “the state is everything, the individual (without the state) is nothing.”

⁴⁴ There are two separate sides to what may be called corporeity. Marcel, by rejecting (Kant’s) relation of reason/ spontaneity -sensuality / receptivity approximates one side of his groundbreaking non-dualistic understanding of corporeity. Hence not the body as a (passive) object, but as “my-body” and “... my body is mine in so far as for me my body is not an object but, rather, I am my body” (Marcel, 1950, p. 100) “... we have to bring in the idea of the body not as an object but as a subject” (Marcel, 1950, p. 101). These two aspects of corporeity are two aspects of a human being. For I am my body, but, I am not identical to it, as identical objects of the external world, but essentially, I am incarnated in it (Marcel, 1950, p. 101; see also Marcel, 1963, pp. 46-47).

lies the germ of solidity and a new kind of power which consists of the creativity typical of Marcel's being.⁴⁵ Every human being has an elemental, inherent ability to resist external attempts that, because of his weakness, try to reify, stigmatize, and thus, in the spirit of abstraction, humiliate him. This humiliation rests "... in a kind of immobilization of an individual and in his abstract limitation instead of understanding that the individual is a unique moment of big adventure ..." (Marcel, 1965, p. 63). This is unique, "for the thing in us which has real value cannot be judged by comparison, having no common measure with anything else" (Marcel, 1951c, p. 19). And somewhere here lies the kind of "... inalienable dignity of human beings whose insult cannot be tolerated" (Marcel, 1965, p. 53).⁴⁶

These considerations bring us back to the question of man as *Homo Viator*—we are on the road, in constant existential and creative tension as well as, transitioning between *to have* and *to be*, between closeness and openness (Marcel, 1963, p. 127). From a certain point of view, "It would not be wrong to say ... that we human beings are a species 'in-between', between Being and Non-Being, or even that we are called upon to *be*—that it is our responsibility to *be*" (Marcel, 1963, p. 77).⁴⁷

Consequently, it can be said that the last source of dignity for the individual (and his value and relevance) is, paradoxically, his confrontation with death, with non-being, when he creatively denies the possible annihilation of his weakness and finitude. But he is not abandoned in this denial. For Marcel, it would not be possible without the second seemingly "more positive" side of transcendence - without fidelity to the ontological exigence *to be*, enshrined by hope ("... hope appears as piercing through time ...", Marcel, 1951b, p. 53) in the sacred mystery of being. For Marcel, human dignity is rationalisation or, in other words, secularisation of sanctity (Marcel, 1965, p. 50; see also p. 56). The following applies: this sanctity is "in the tense relation with finite human being" (Marcel, 1965, p. 64).

In the previous paragraphs, we focused on Marcel's understanding of human dignity as "finitude", without taking into account the already suggested intersubjective dimension; yet such an understanding would have been inadequate because, ultimately, as Marcel writes "... that what I have called the ontological weight of human experience is the love which it is able to bestow" (Marcel, 1963, p. 79).⁴⁸ As in the love I encounter with "the other", imminently in his nudity and indetermination, without taking account of what he *has* and

⁴⁵ On the relation of courage to dignity, as well as to faith in G. Marcel's philosophy, see Marcus (2013, p. 129 ff.).

⁴⁶ Responses to these ideas can be found in bioethics. In relation to Marcel's idea that "... human dignity consists in the very basic capability to resist one's own stigmatisation and reification by others as well as to struggle for one's own recognition as a valuable person", A. Markova continues in her attempt to reinterpret dignity as understood in Nussbaum's *Capability Approach* for people with mental disabilities. (Markova, 2011) A. Söderberg, F. Gilje and A. Norberg adopted this idea ("active defense") as one of their six requirements for a dignified approach to patients, to be applied to intensive care nursing (Söderberg, Gilje, & Norberg, 1997).

⁴⁷ See Venter, 2002, p. 359.

⁴⁸ This is the *to be* form of love, which is substantially different from what is understood by the *to have* form: "Love, in so far as distinct from desire or as opposed to desire, love treated as the subordination of the self to a superior reality, a reality at my deepest level more truly me than I am myself ... appears to me to be what one might call the essential ontological datum" (Marcel, 1949, p. 167).

what is attributed to him (“how he is judged”) by the spirit of abstraction.⁴⁹ In this respect Marcel (1963, pp. 130-131; 1965, p. 61) favours Levinas’ term “face-to-face” to denote this direct “relation” over the term *otherness* which Levinas uses to express the uniqueness (non-identifiability) of the “other as other”. He talks about him as “my neighbour” and of a whole new relationship called *fraternity*. For Marcel, the basis of what is inaccurately called human dignity can only be anchored in an open fraternity, in the each true human encounter⁵⁰ (Marcel, 1965, p. 65).

Marcel illustrates these two ways of understanding dignity by giving the example of the “triple motto” from the French Revolution: liberty-equality-fraternity. There is “... between equality and fraternity a secret opposition connected with the fact that these two exigencies stem from two different sources. ...equality is essentially the claiming of something; it is, in the fullest sense of the word, ego-centric” (Marcel, 1963, p.131-132) and this can also be expressed by the following: “I am your equal, his equal, or their equal” and “there is no reason why I should not be your equal; it would be even irrational to admit that I am not” (Marcel, 1963, p. 132).⁵¹ “But with fraternity, it seems to me, the case is very different. Unlike equality, fraternity is essentially hetero-centric: you are my brother, I recognize you as such ...” (Marcel, 1963, p. 132) “... and, because you are my brother, I rejoice not only in anything good which may happen to you but also in acknowledging the ways in which you are superior to me. Why should I feel the need of being your equal? We are brothers through all our dissimilarities ...” (Marcel, 1963, p. 132).⁵²

Thus we come to recognize a new type of equality—paradoxically we are equal in our inequality, we are equal in that we take into account (axiologically and ontologically) the relevant uniqueness and incomparability in each of us. It is also in the context of love and fraternity that we should, according to Marcel (Marcel, 1963, p. 145 et seq.), interpret the first part of the French motto—freedom. Freedom should not just be about (egocentric) choice, selection (as in classical / abstract equality, but also in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre), but about overcoming its borders and limits; it is the freedom directed towards another (Marcel, 1963, p. 147)⁵³ and it is an answer (response) to the call of another. Part

⁴⁹ That is, without different characteristics (qualities, abilities etc.). Because, as Marcel writes, “Characterisation is a certain kind of possession, or claim to possession, of that which cannot be possessed” (Marcel, 1949, p. 167).

⁵⁰ In Marcel’s philosophy everyday expressions such as *neighbor*, *encounter*, *fraternity* and so on are philosophically (and even ontologically) rehabilitated.

⁵¹ According to Marcel, at the heart of such “equality” lies a Nietzschean-Scheller ressentiment.

⁵² Therefore, if we are to rethink human dignity, and avoid abstract rationalism “... it is on condition that we place ourselves in the perspective of fraternity and not of equalitarianism” (Marcel, 1963, p. 133). This has consequences especially for the socio-political level of considerations. In fact, Marcel considers egalitarianism to often lie behind the emergence of social tensions and “... this tension disappears as we learn to appreciate the values that we recognize in others, and do not find in ourselves” (Marcel, 1969, p. 64; see also Marcel, 1965, p.174).

⁵³ Here, for Marcel, the other does not threaten my integrity as Sartre says (Marcel, 1963, p. 141). – Remember Sartre’s – “Hell is other people”, but they “... will have become an integral part of my experience” (Marcel, 1963, p. 141).

of this fraternal call is always to stand actively in defense of the oppressed and humiliated, whoever they are (Marcel, 1963, p. 133).⁵⁴

If we summarize, somewhat simplistically, what we have discussed so far about G. Marcel's understanding of dignity, then we can say that Gabriel Marcel created, based on a rationalist critique of the traditional (Kantian) understanding of dignity as a kind of power, a genuine existential concept of dignity as weakness—a fragile and vulnerable finitude of the individual. In Marcel's conception, however, this weakness / finitude is active, self-transcending. It lies in the individual's capacity for creative resistance against attempts at reification and in pursuit of recognition of his unique human values. The inherent component of this dignity is, at the inter-subjective level, an imminent encounter with one's neighbour in love (fraternity), which is a service to the other in defence of his weakness and does not require reciprocity. Ultimately, for Marcel a dignified human life is “creative and fraternal” (Marcel, 1963, p. 170) and necessarily grounded in the sacred mystery of being.

At the same time we can say that Marcel's reflections on dignity are not, considering the core of his thoughts, *ad hoc* but are an organic rethink. Although we can say, as B. Sweetman has, that Marcel's work is an “... attempt to safeguard the dignity and integrity of human person by emphasizing the inadequacy of the materialistic life and unavoidable human need for transcendence” (Sweetman, 2016, p. 48), his *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (1963) is a particular case in which he tries to show explicitly that his conception of human dignity is the outcome of his whole thinking. For Marcel believes that it is through human dignity that man is able to open himself up to “the supernatural light” on the road to the mystery of being (Marcel, 1963, p. 95).

However, it seems true to say that, as with all his work, including that on human dignity, his philosophy is a quiet (although not many admit this) source (or ground water) which has subsequently fed rushing streams and roaring rivers in vigorous areas of philosophy. As Gutting notes, there was no big existentialist issue that Marcel did not deal with nor create (Gutting, 2002, p. 98) and many of his ideas survive in transformation.⁵⁵ This is how the question of human dignity was received. Some time ago the basic concepts he discussed as a solution to this question—*fragility*, *vulnerability*, and *finitude* etc.—became a common part of the theoretical and methodological equipment used in certain lines of

⁵⁴ Even this intersubjective side of Marcel's understanding of human dignity is echoed in bioethics. Söderberg, Gilje and Norberg classify the idea of *fraternity* (with explicit reference to G. Marcel) as being one of the above mentioned six requirements in the dignified approach to the patient (Söderberg, Gilje, & Norberg, 1997).

⁵⁵ In this note we mention some of them. According to R.M. Zaner, Marcel was “... perhaps the first to discover the phenomenon of “my body qua mine” (Zaner, 1971, p. 12) that greatly inspired not only M. Merleau-Ponty (see also Gutting, 2002 p. 102), but J.-P. Sartre, too. With the concept of corporeity, as J. Sivák writes “... we encounter almost everywhere in contemporary philosophy” (Sivák, 1969, p. 87). In parallel with M. Buber, Marcel began thinking about intersubjectivity and dialogue philosophy prior to (and with) Levinas and was first to examine otherness in philosophy. Obviously these were not just hermeneutical ideas, picked up by P. Ricoeur, since he acknowledged Marcel as his teacher, and Ricoeur himself is considered to have been the main theorist to have continued developing Marcel's philosophy in the second half of the 20th century. At present, the intellectual heritage of Gabriel Marcel is kept up by the *Association Présence de Gabriel Marcel* in France (active since 1975) and the *Gabriel Marcel Society* in the USA (active since 1986).

thinking in philosophy and ethics (including bioethics).⁵⁶ We can also see the continuation of Marcel's basic ideas (see notes No. 46 and No. 54), often in response to the philosophical thinking of P. Ricoeur. In this sense, we believe that Gabriel Marcel remains a philosopher with something to say even on the burning issues of human life at the beginning of the 21st century, including the question of dignity.

References

Bendlová, P. (1988). Marcelova filosofie tragického poutníka k tajemství bytí na cestě ozařované nadějí [Marcel's philosophy of the tragic pilgrim on the road to the mystery of being illuminated by hope]. In G. Marcel, *Přítomnost a nesmrtelnost* [Presence and immortality] (pp.105-136). Praha: Mladá fronta.

Bendlová, P. (2003). Marcelův vztah k hodnotám [Marcel's attitude to values]. In *Hodnoty v existenciální filosofii Gabriela Marcela* [Values in the existential philosophy of Gabriel Marcel] (pp. 7-48). Praha: Academia.

Bostrom, N. (2005). In defense of posthuman dignity. *Bioethics*, 19(13), 202-214.

Cicero, M. T. (1928). *De Officiis*. London: William Heinemann, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Conversations Gabriel Marcel (2017). Available at http://homepage.westmont.edu/hoeckley/readings/symposium/pdf/201_300/246.pdf

Čáp, J., Palenčár, M., & Kuručová, R. (2016). *Ludská dôstojnosť v kontexte smrti a umierania* [Human dignity in the context of death and dying]. Martin: Osveta.

Düwell, M., Braarvig, J., Brownsword, R., & Mieth, D. (Eds.). (2014). *The Cambridge handbook of human dignity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gilson, E. (Ed.) (1947). *Existentialisme chrétien: Gabriel Marcel*. Paris: Plon.

Gluchman, V. (2012). Ethics of social consequences – methodology of bioethics education. *Ethics and Bioethics (in Central Europe)*, 2 (1-2), 16-27.

Gutting, G. (2002). *French philosophy in the twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

International Convenant on Civil and Political Rights (1989). In M. E. Winston (Ed.), *The philosophy of human rights* (pp. 263-280). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

International Convenant on Economics, Social and and Cultural Rights (1989). In M. E. Winston (Ed.), *The philosophy of human rights* (pp. 280-289). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Kemp, P., Rendtorff, J., & Johanssen, M. N. (Eds.) (2000). *Bioethics and biolaw. Vol. II. Four ethical principles*. Copenhagen: Rhodos International Publishers.

Janke, W. (1995). *Filosofie existence* [The philosophy of existence]. Praha: Mladá fronta.

Kant, I. (1981). *Grounding for the metaphysics of morals*. Cambridge, Indianapolis : Hackett Publishing Company.

Le Maitre, G. (1951). Gabriel Marcel, Le mystère de l'être. Réflexion et mystère. Foi et réalité. *Revue de Sciences Religieuses, tome 25, fascicule 4*, 416-417.

Mackenzie, C., Rogers, W., & Dodds, S. (Eds.) (2014). *Vulnerability. New essays in ethics and feminist philosophy*. Oxford: Exfor University Press.

MacIntyre , A. (1999). *Dependent rational animals: Why human beings need the virtues*. Chicago: Open Court.

Macklin, R. (2003). Dignity is useless concept. *BMJ*, 327(20-27).

⁵⁶ See e.g. Kemp, Rendtorff, & Johanssen, (Eds.) (2000); MacIntyre (1999); Mackenzie, Rogers, & Dodds (Eds.) (2014); Ricoeur (2007); and others.

Marcel, G. (1949). Outlines of a phenomenology of having. In G. Marcel, *Being and having* (pp. 154-175). Glasgow: The University Press.

Marcel, G. (1950). *The mystery of being*. Vol. I. Reflexion & mystery. London: Harvill Press, Ltd.

Marcel, G. (1951). *Homo viator. Introduction to a metaphysic of hope*. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.

Marcel, G. (1951a). Being and nothingness. In G. Marcel, *Homo viator. Introduction to a metaphysic of hope* (pp. 166-184). Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.

Marcel, G. (1951b). Sketch of a phenomenology and metaphysic of hope. In G. Marcel, *Homo viator. Introduction to a metaphysic of hope* (pp. 29-67). Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.

Marcel, G. (1951c). The ego and its relation to others. In G. Marcel, *Homo viator: Introduction to a metaphysic of hope* (pp. 13-28). Chicago: Henry Regnery Company.

Marcel, G. (1963). *The existential background of human dignity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Marcel, G. (1964). *La dignité humaine et ses assises existentielles*. Paris: Éditions Aubier Motaigne.

Marcel, G. (1965). Existenciálny aspekt ľudskej dôstojnosti [Existential aspects of human dignity]. In Človek, kto si? [Man, who are you?] (pp. 51-65). Bratislava: Obzor.

Marcel, G. (1967). *Essai de Philosophie Conrète*. Paris: Gallimard.

Marcel, G. (1969). Pokoj na zemi. Dve rozpravy. Jedna tragédia. [Peace on Earth. Two treatises. One tragedy]. *Revue svetovej literatúry*, 6, 63-67.

Marcel, G. (1995). *Tajemnica bytu* [The mysterium of being]. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Znak.

Marcel, G. (1998). Concrete approaches to investigating the ontological mystery. In K. R. Hanley, *Gabriel Marcel's perspectives on the broken world* (pp. 172-197). Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.

Marcus, P. (2013). *In search of the spiritual: Gabriel Marcel, psychoanalysis, and the sacred*. London: Karnac Books Ltd.

Markova, A. (2011). The concept of dignity in the capability approach: A personalist perspective. In International Conference Values of the Human Person: Contemporary Challenges, 3-4 June 2011, Bucharest, Romania. Available at: eprints.nbu.bg/1084/

Maryniarczyk, A. (2013). *Homo viator. Człowiek w kulturze* 23/2013, 29-33.

McGrudden, C. (Ed.) (2014). *Understanding human dignity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mounier, E. (1948). *Existentialist philosophies. An Introduction*. London: Rockliff.

Pascal, B. (2004). *Pensées*. Cambridge, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

Pinker, S. (2008). The stupidity of dignity. Available at <http://richarddawkins.net/article>

Rachels, J. (1990). *Created from animals. The moral implications of Darwinism*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Ricoeur, P. (2007). Autonomy and vulnerability. In P. Ricoeur (Ed.), *Reflections on the just* (pp. 72-90). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sartre, J.-P. (2007). *Existentialism is a humanism*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Sensen, O. (2011). *Kant on human dignity*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.

Schaber, P. (2014). Dignity only for humans? On the dignity and inherent value of non-human beings. In M. Düwell, J. Braarvig, R. Brownsword, & D. Mieth (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of human dignity*. (pp. 546-550). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Singer, P. (1986). All animals are equal. In P. Singer (Ed.), *Applied ethics* (pp. 215-228). New York: Oxford University Press.

Sivák, J. (1989). Polyfonický mysliteľ Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973). [Gabriel Marcel, a polyphonic thinker]. *Slovenské pohľady*, 105(12), 85-89.

Skinner, B. F. (1976). *Beyond freedom and dignity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.

Söderberg, A., Gilje, F., & Norberg, A. (1997). Dignity in situations of ethical difficulty in intensive care. *Intensive and Critical Care Nursing*, 13, 135-144.

Sweetman, B. (2016). The uniqueness and continuing relevance of Gabriel Marcel. *Studia Humana*, 5(2), 47-51.

Sulmasy, D. P. (2013). The varieties of human dignity: A logical and conceptual analysis. *Medhealth Care and Philos*, 16(4), 937-944.

Tarnowski, K. (1995). Gabriel Marcel, filozof próby. [Gabriel Marcel, philosopher of trial]. In G. Marcel, *Tajemnica Bytu* [The mysterium of being] (pp. 9-22). Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1989). In M. E. Winston (Ed.), *The philosophy of human rights* (pp. 257-262). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Venter, J. J. (2002). Human dignity in weakness – Gabriel Marcel's conception of human dignity. In A. T. Tymieniecka (Ed.), *Analecta Husserliana LXXIV*. (pp. 351-372). Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Vizgin, V. P. (2004). Filosofija nadeždy Gabriela Marcela [Gabriel Marcel's philosophy of hope]. In Gabriel Marcel, *Opyt konkretnoj filosofiji* [Essay on concrete philosophy] (pp. 198-211). Moskva: Izdatelstvo Respublika.

Wainwright, P., & Gallagher, A. (2008). On different types of dignity in nursing care: A critique of Nordenfelt. *Nursing Philosophy*, 9, 46-54.

Waldron, J. (2012). Lecture 1: Dignity and rank. In Meir Dan-Cohen (Ed.), *Dignity, rank, & rights* (pp. 13-46). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Waldron, J. (2014). *What do the philosophers have against dignity?* New York University Public Law and Legal Theory Working Papers. Paper 496. Available at http://lsr.nellco.org/nyu_plltwp/496.

Zaner, R. M. (1971). *The problem of embodiment: Some contributions to a phenomenology of the body*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Department of Bioethics UNESCO
 University of Prešov,
 17 Novembra 1,
 08001 Prešov,
 Slovakia
 Email: marian.palencar@unipo.sk