



# A Comparative Study of Consciousness in Gabriel Marcel and Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat

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## Abstract:

This comparative study seeks to explore the intersections and divergences between the Mandukya Upanishad, an ancient Indian philosophical text, and the existentialist philosophy of 20th-century French philosopher Gabriel Marcel. The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat, rooted in the Vedantic tradition, delves into the nature of reality and consciousness, emphasizing the significance of the syllable "Om" and the states of consciousness. In contrast, Marcel's existentialist philosophy centers around the lived human experience, concrete existence, and the exploration of transcendence within the realm of personal encounters. Considering the roles of hope and faith in both traditions. Marcel's existentialism emphasizes hope as an essential element in facing the challenges of existence, and this can be compared with the Upanishadic quest for liberation (moksha) and the transformative power of realizing the unity of Atman and Brahman. Through this comparative study, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the philosophical resonances and distinctions between the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat and Gabriel Marcel's existentialist thought, highlighting their contributions to the exploration of consciousness, Inter-Subjectivity, I-Thou and the human experience. Examining how both the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat and Marcel's philosophy approach the understanding of consciousness. While the Upanishad explores the four states of consciousness, Marcel's existentialism emphasizes the lived body and immediate, personal experiences.

**Keywords:** Marcel, Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat, lived experience, Inter-Subjectivity, I-Thou, Consciousness

## Introduction

Consciousness, the enigmatic realm of human experience, has been a subject of profound contemplation and exploration in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. This comparative study delves into the perspectives of Gabriel Marcel, a prominent existentialist philosopher, and the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat*, a foundational text in Indian philosophy. By examining their thoughts on consciousness, we aim to draw parallels and distinctions, unravelling the diverse ways these two philosophical traditions approach the fundamental nature of human awareness.

Gabriel Marcel, a French existentialist philosopher, explored the nature of human existence and consciousness. He emphasized the importance of personal experience, feelings, and relationships in understanding our existence. Marcel distinguished between problem-solving and mystery, suggesting that certain aspects of human life, such as love and faith, cannot be fully understood through analytical reasoning alone.

On the other hand, the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat* is a part of the ancient Indian scriptures known as the Upaniṣads. It specifically focuses on the nature of consciousness and the ultimate reality (Brahman). The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat* introduces the concept of AUM (or OM) as a symbol representing the three states of consciousness: waking (*Jāgrt*), dreaming (*Svapna*), and deep sleep (*Suṣupti*), as well as the transcendent fourth state known as *Turīya*.

### **Gabriel Marcel's Phenomenology of Consciousness:**

Gabriel Marcel, a French philosopher, playwright, and literary critic, is the developer of Phenomenological Existentialism. His existential philosophy is considered to be theistic for he focused on the relation of life to God. He also believes in the idea of inter-subjectivity, where one should be available to others for him to discover himself and the others thus be able to develop respect and recover the meaning of life through the discover of being. His development of such philosophy is majorly caused by his experience as a veteran in World War I, as a liaison, which provides information to the family about the situation of their loved ones in the war. This job causes him to reflect on life, war, and the essence of man as a being.

Marcel's philosophical methodology was unique, although it bears some resemblance to both existentialism and phenomenology broadly construed. He insisted that philosophy begins with concrete experience rather than abstractions. To this end he makes constant use of examples in order to ground the philosophical ideas he is investigating. The method itself consists in "working...up from life to thought and then down from thought to life again, so that [one] may try to throw more light upon life" (Marcel 1979, Vol. II p. 41). Thus, this philosophy is a sort of "description bearing upon the structures which reflection elucidates starting from experience" (Marcel 1963, p. 180). In addition, Marcel expressed a refreshing preference for philosophizing in ordinary language. He maintained that "we should employ current forms of ordinary language which distort our experiences far less than the elaborate expressions in which philosophical language is crystallized" (Marcel 1965, p. 158).

The uncustomary thought of Gabriel Marcel puts one in a dilemma of placing him in any one category of traditional philosophy. Gallagher remarks, "Presenting elements of phenomenology, existentialism, idealism, empiricism all consorting together in symbiotic bliss, it completely defies classification." (Gallagher Kenneth T, 1962, p.1) Cain similarly remarks, "An existential philosopher decade before the term 'existential' became fashionable, a phenomenological thinker long before phenomenology became a central concern of European philosophy, a religious thinker at a time when religion had not yet regained respectability in philosophical circles – Gabriel Marcel has been a herald of our times." (Cain, Seymour, 1963, p. 11.) This shows the prolific nature of Marcel's thoughts and writings. This is the outcome of his understanding of the task of philosophy.

Philosophy, for Marcel, is a perennial mode of inquiry that must always start anew. The primary function of his philosophy is "not to provide us with readymade conclusions. Its real mission is to awaken, to sensitize and to appeal, rather than to teach and to give transferable information." (Herbert Spiegelberg, Vol. 2, p. 427) In "An Essay in Autobiography", Marcel touches upon various aspects of philosophy and a philosopher. He writes:

...the supreme mission of the philosopher cannot consist in proclaiming a certain number of official truths liable to rally votes at international congress...(one has to prove, not only by

arguments, but by the trails and whole life)... that a philosopher worthy of the name cannot be a man of congresses, and that he deviates from his path every time that he allows himself to be torn from the solitude which he is calling... in an examination there are clearly formulated rules and the stage has been set in advance, whereas in the real world, which is, or should be, that of the philosopher, there is nothing of the kind. The stage always remains to be set; in a sense everything always starts from zero, and a philosopher is not worthy of the name unless he not only accepts but will this harsh necessity. (Marcel, 1973, P. 124-125)

In another place, what Marcel says about philosophy is very enlightening: “If my work as a whole has any meaning at all, it is to demonstrate that there can be a philosophy that helps uncover this demand (since for the far greater part it is hidden) and, most importantly, serves to strengthen and encourage it. It teaches men all over again how to breathe; it wakes them up as a mother awakens her child when the moment comes to give him life. To awaken, to nourish, to teach men to breathe: these basic functions are reflected in the only philosophy I consider to be of any value; it can help us live, and (who knows?) to prepare ourselves along the paths of *docta ignorantia* for the ineffable amazement that awaits us on the eternal morning. (Marcel, 1967, P 70-71) Marcel method of philosophic enquiry may be characterized as broadly phenomenological. His analysis is directed to concrete situations to human situations, like the relationship between myself and other human beings.

### **Gabriel Marcel - authenticity consists in respecting the 'recollected presence' of absolute being in oneself and in the other**

‘Presence’ is not a preserved effigy of an object which vanishes. Presence is more than the object. It exceeds the object. It exceeds the object on every side. “Death is the test of presence.” Fidelity is more real between the living and the dead. Marcel is not referring to ‘physical presence’ but to ‘spiritual presence’ which is dynamic and creative. All relationship develops and is created anew from moment to moment. Is not Marcel pointing to a realm of presence which is creative and dynamic? The ‘permanence’ for which Marcel has been searching is still not permanence but lively, active and creative continuance. The search of Marcel has been for ‘permanence’ which is beyond change and the general laws of dissolution, beyond death and decay. The ‘permanence’ which he sought is, certainly indestructible, inexhaustible but not free from change, it is dynamic and not a static truth. Creative activity is very much there. Marcel is not interested in static truth. He is pointing to creative permanence, a realm which is permanent and still creative: a relationship that is created anew from moment to moment. The ‘permanence’ found is not free from change but this change is of a new sort, a being lives in pure love, the ‘fullness of love’ which is nothing but Being. In love the relationship is renewed from moment to moment. In love one aspires for more and ever more, the thirst is still ahead of fulfilment. In the ephemeral realm we have the foretaste of divine love, fidelity, faith, hope, etc.

In *Being and Having* he speaks of the fullness of being as “Uncharacterizable.” He goes on to speak of it as “Absolute Being.” So we tend to think that he means God. Elsewhere ‘Being’ is also called ‘Presence’, and here, in this context we read his words of clarification: “God can only be given to me as Absolute Presence in worship; any idea I form of him is only an abstract expression or intellectualization of the Presence.” (Marcel,

1949 P. 169-70) Now, love, a genuine human love, is an experience which is accessible to anyone. And anyone, believer or not, in such love transcends this world and participates in the fullness of communion what the man of religious faith calls God. Marcel does not go in for 'proving' the existence of God or the absolute 'Thou', "... but sees an appeal to the Absolute Thou as the absolute resource of the logic of human intersubjectivity." (Thomas Busch, 1975, P. 8).

What is true of love is true of fidelity and hope. In genuine fidelity and hope such a deep experience of 'Being' is possible, and hence, one has a glimpse of Being as plenitude. This is also a deeper dimension of the world and beings of intersubjectivity. It is in such glimpses of being as plenitude, however momentary, that perhaps releases outbursts like: "It is good to be alive!" Marcel calls it "the *gaudium essendi*, the joy of existing." (Marcel, 1973, P. 42) Concrete examples of this include the return of the prodigal son, the beautiful discovery of a piece of art, etc. All these indeed convey the overwhelming beauty of the universe. This is what Marcel calls a "foretaste" of the plenitude of Being. Nevertheless, man does (and must) acknowledge his finitude. So long as he is on earth he is "an itinerant, a wayfarer, a creature who grasps himself as present to himself, but in a presence which cannot be separated concretely from presence to others. It is a precarious and continually threatened presence, but it is not without the aspiration toward plenitude, toward the *pleroma*." (53) Such a 'revelation' is 'conceivable' for "a being who is involved – committed ... a being who participates in a reality which is non-problematical and which provides him with his foundation as subject." (Marcel, 1991, P. 46.) Lack of creed, or faith in a positive place through certain higher modes of human experience, in no way involves adherence to any given religion. (46)

Presence is intersubjective. It cannot but be interpreted as the expression of a will which seeks to reveal itself to me; but this revelation supposes that I do not put on obstacle in its way. In short, the subject is treated, not like as an object, but as the magnetic centre of presence. At the root of presence there is a being who takes me into consideration, who is guarded by me as taking me into account; I do not exist for it. Presence as response to the act by which the subject opens himself to receive; in this sense it is the gift of oneself. Presence belongs only to the being who is capable of giving himself. (Marcel, 1967, P. 157)

As we said, presence is more than mere 'being there alongside others' we do not only experience the presence of living persons, but also of the dead. We have referred to Marcel's life-long experience of his beloved mother and dear wife. The experience of the invisible presence of dear ones shows our loving communion with the dead. This, we can say finally, is the bond of truly intersubjective relationship.

For Marcel, man is basically intersubjective and dialogical. He is never an isolated monad, but always a being-with. Hence, authentic human existence for Marcel is an intersubjective existence. Indeed, the aim of his philosophy is to restore to man the authentic existence that he has lost in today's world of science and technology, which has reduced him to a mere object and function. However, intersubjectivity, is not something that can be identified with the mere coming together of persons. Nor can it be reduced to mere biological or cognitive experience. Rather, it is something that belongs to the realm of mystery. Persons are not merely a collection of articles. They are put together with feelings, freedoms and the ability to be more than the physical

unity that each one is by extensive reckoning. So, when life flows through the persons of a community, they are bound also by emotions and specific freedom and the Being-dimension. This inter-subjectivity becomes more meaningful when more than one person come and will to live together and unite. It has become more relevant and meaningful today that it can be a key solution to many of the problems of breaking family ties. It is the only medicine that can knit together many broken hearts. The many social ills can be done away with if this aspect is seen and experienced and practised.

Both Marcel's philosophy and the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat* are highly spiritual in their outlook, and their philosophy is saturated with spiritual overtones. They have found their philosophies realize under the guidance of the Principle of Sufficient Reason – the Divine – while a humanist or agnostic finds it difficult to follow their philosophy. Yet, against all odds, they have held on to their mode of philosophizing with determination. They were willing to be ostracized for their bold stand; they have been unwilling to compromise on the value of the essential foundations. We find that so much stress is laid on love, fidelity, commitment etc. (Manimala, V.J. 1991, P.233-34).

Intersubjectivity is the basic and immediate ground of our existence in which the 'we' dimension is more, that is, the community, society, family, friendship, and so on. The essence of human person consists not in his separation from everyone else, but in the dialogical relationship of person with person. In other words, human existence attains its fulfilment only through the interpersonal relationship between man and man. For no man is an island and no man can survive as an island in the vast ocean of men. Man's nature would remain static or crippled and in fact 'non-human' without an essential relationship with his fellowmen. Therefore, human existence is the existence of 'I' and 'Thou' and it is the 'I' and the 'other' that ground ourselves as subjects in the world of inter-subjectivity.

### **The Role of Interpersonal Relationships in Shaping Consciousness**

Marcel tells us that the authentic way in which I can exist and act is the plane of the *I-Thou* relationship. Whenever I consider my neighbour as a thing, as an object or function, he/she is nothing more than a he or she or it for me. When, on the other hand, I look upon him or her as *Thou*, I begin to see him as a person. In the light of this authentic 'I-thou' relation, Marcel goes further to state that God is the Absolute thou'; he presents the personal dimension of the 'Absolute Thou' (Donald McCarthy, 1966, p. 175) However, he clearly asserts that every human relationship becomes meaningful and authentic only in relation to the absolute thou, in whom all values are said to be contained, otherwise human relationships would be a relation of 'I-It' or 'I-He' or 'I-She', rather than 'I-thou' relations, cemented by creative fidelity. Thus great family of the 'Absolute Thou' with the other realities is founded on Being, linked by the intersubjective relation continued by fidelity as regained by love.

Marcel's Absolute Thou should be approached, not from effect to cause, but through the mystery of His presence. Presence is mystery in the exact measure in which it is presence. And fidelity is the active perpetuation of presence, the renewal of its benefits. In the Gifford lectures Marcel liked prayer and humility as part of this program of invocation of the Absolute Thou. Existential prayer is necessarily an interior disposition.

Only a 'monadistic' point of view introduces the problem of some supposed external relation between the person who prays and the person who should hear his prayer but may be absent. Prayer becomes possible when intersubjectivity is recognized, and where it is operative. This is not some stated or verified mode of structure, but a free commitment which can also be denied. Prayer is therefore an exaltation of inner freedom in the sense of dedication.

Correlative to the spirit of invocation in prayer Marcel describes phenomenologically a certain interior attitude of response or availability to other thou's, including the Absolute Thou. "Marcel binds up this entire picture in the package of human freedom and self-assertion. Thus I can freely choose to follow the path of transcendence, to invoke the Absolute Thou in prayer, and to dispose myself for His gifts of grace. In this way, then, Marcel's philosophy climbs up by way of the "thou" to the Thou that is God, the Supreme Thou, the Absolute Being within human experience, to Him in whom we rediscover *engagement, fidelite* and *amour* in their most perfect form.

### **Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat - authentic existence is pure consciousness**

The wisdom of the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat* lies at the heart of every yogi's journey, for it allows us to unveil the mystery of consciousness. In recent years, interest regarding the nature of consciousness has grown dramatically, both in popular culture and in the scientific community. Modern perspectives on consciousness largely assume that the phenomenon of consciousness is a by-product of our brain and nervous system. In other words, our physiology, or more broadly, the world of matter and energy, creates consciousness.

Yoga understands consciousness in a fundamentally different way. It asserts that consciousness is the source of our identity as a human being at a spiritual, psychological, and even physical level. Consciousness gives rise to our universe and is the most definitive characteristic of what ancient yogis referred to as our inner world, or higher reality.

The *Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣad* is the shortest amongst the principal *Upaniṣads* having just 12 *mantras* (verses) but presents the quintessence of our entire teaching of *Upaniṣads*. It analyses the entire range of human consciousness in the three states of waking (*jāgrta*) dream (*svapna*) and dreamless sleep (*susupti*) which are common to all humans. It asserts un-equivocally that the Absolute Reality is non-dual (*advaita*) and attribute-less (*nirguṇa*). It has a unique method of approach to Truth. It provides symbol to for meditation in the mono-syllable AUM comprising of three sounds A, U, M, detailing it's philosophical implications. According to *Muktikopaniṣat*, it forms the epitome of all the hundred and eight *Upaniṣads* which have been accepted as authentic.

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat* is treasured for the potency of its wisdom pertaining to the different states of consciousness, and specifically, the fourth state—transcendental awareness, or *turīya*.

When approaching the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat*, it is vital that we transform our attitude toward the concept of consciousness and cultivate a respectful openness and genuine desire to experience consciousness, not as an object to be understood, but rather as an experience of higher reality. This begins by learning to feel awareness

rather than simply thinking about it. Cultivating a felt sense of awareness rather than an intellectual understanding of it allows us to eventually have a direct experience of consciousness.

This path of direct experience of consciousness is the specialty of *raja-yoga*—combining the power of *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, and meditation—all of which awaken us to an experience of our inner world. We often think of *prāṇa* only in the context of *prāṇāyāma*, but in the tradition of the Himalayan Masters, cultivating *pranic* awareness is a central theme of all the limbs of *rāja-yoga*. As we cultivate *pranic* awareness, we become aware of awareness itself. This is when we can actually feel an awareness of consciousness, rather than simply think about consciousness.

When we combine a direct experience of consciousness gained through practice with the study of the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat*'s source wisdom, we can find the key to unlocking an extraordinary potential within. Swami Rama and the sages of the Himalayan Tradition refer to this inner experience of absolute reality as *turīya*—the fourth and highest state of consciousness.

## **Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat's emphasis on the sacred syllable AUM and its metaphysical significance**

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat* focuses on the sacred syllable “AUM” (or “OM”). It is considered the primordial sound from which the entire universe emerges. This *Upaniṣat* delves into the significance of AUM. Here AUM represents the three states of consciousness which are waking (A), dreaming (U) and deep sleep (M). There is also a silence that follows the M and this represents the transcendent fourth state (*Turīya*) that underlies other states of consciousness.

### **Four States of Consciousness**

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat* describes four states of consciousness, corresponding to the syllables of AUM:

- Waking State (*Jāgrta*) – The state of wakefulness and external sensory perception (A).
- Dream State (*Svapna*) – The state of dreams and internal mental activity (U).
- Deep Sleep State (*Suṣupti*) – The state of dreamless sleep & absence of mental activity (M).
- *Turīya* (The Fourth) – The transcendent fourth state that represents the pure consciousness, beyond the other three states and their modifications. It is the state of self-realisation and spiritual awakening.

### **Non-Duality (Advaita)**

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat* emphasizes the non-dual nature of reality, asserting that the individual self (*Ātman*) and the ultimate reality (*Brahman*) are one and the same. It presents the idea that the *Turiya* state represents the realization of the non-dual, eternal essence that pervades all existence.

### **Importance of Self-Knowledge**

This *Upaniṣat* emphasises the significance of self-knowledge (*Ātma-Jñāna*) as the key to liberation (*Mokṣa*). Self-knowledge leads to the realization of one's true nature as the eternal, unchanging consciousness (*Ātman*).

## Meditation and Contemplation

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat* encourages contemplative meditation on the syllable AUM and the states of consciousness it represents. It is a profound tool for introspection and self-inquiry. This inquiry leads to higher states of awareness and understanding.

The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat*'s teachings have had a profound impact on the development of Indian philosophy and spiritual practices. It has also influenced various Indian schools most particularly Advaita Vedānta. Advaita Vedānta emphasises the unity of the individual soul (Ātman) with the ultimate reality (Brahman). Through its exploration of the nature of consciousness and reality, the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat* offers profound insights into the human experience and the journey towards spiritual awakening and liberation.

## Conclusion:

This comparative study sheds light on the nuanced perspectives on consciousness in Gabriel Marcel's existentialist philosophy and the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣat*. While both traditions share commonalities in their recognition of the subjective, transcendent, and interconnected nature of consciousness, their unique cultural, religious, and philosophical contexts contribute to distinct approaches in understanding and expressing the mysteries of human awareness. The dialogue between Western existentialism and Eastern *Upaniṣadic* thought enriches our comprehension of consciousness, inviting us to contemplate its profound depths from diverse vantage points.

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