

Gabriel Marcel's Existential Fulcrum in the Everyday Commuting: A Primary and Secondary Reflection of a UST-bound Commuter

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Abstract: The foremost subject of this paper is Gabriel Marcel's Existential Fulcrum, along with the overarching goal of being able to identify and provide discourses of its relation to the phenomenology of *commuting*. The objective of the paper is to construct connections as to how the daily experience of commuting is relevant in realizing and knowing one's existential being in the light of Gabriel Marcel's philosophy. The everyday travelling through public transportation in today's time has been customary for people especially those in the workplace and even to students. Accordingly, this paper shall be a moving factor to appreciate the time that one allots during commuting to make it a moment of realizations, specifically of reflection through which how Marcel considers it to be. Through examining two philosophical fields namely phenomenology and existentialism, the study will trace the convergences of the two to answer how could an individual know of his full existence through reflection during the hours of commuting.

Keywords: existential fulcrum, phenomenology, commuting, reflection

Commuting in a general sense means to travel from one place to another as a daily or regular routine. However, for us Filipinos, customarily, commuting is related with the use of public transportation such as trains, jeepneys, buses, and even tricycles. Commuting is very common to everyone especially those who are in the working class and of course to students. This accustomed act of commuting which often times serves as a mere pattern for peoples' daily survival if only given philosophical attention to, could really be of great significance to one's living. Hence the very objective of the paper is to be able to look at commuting as a phenomenological occurrence in light of Gabriel Marcel's philosophy.

The only child of Henry Marcel a government official, diplomat, and a well-known curator, and Laure Meyer, a Jew, Gabriel Marcel was born on 7 December 1889. He lived as a critic, dramatist, and a philosopher for eighty-three years. He was interested in music, drama, and philosophy. Both his parents provided the foundation for his philosophical thought. His father is considered to be a lapsed Catholic and a cultured agnostic who does not even care to have his son baptized. This attitude of Henry results of him not allowing engaging at religious conversations at home.¹

Marcel's philosophical project was noticeably distinctive as it touches both existentialism and phenomenology.² Hence, his philosophy is the perfect fit in analyzing and applying an everyday lived human experience in the understanding and

communicating of oneself. Another reason why his thought is very close to mankind is that he makes himself available to common people by using ordinary language to comprehend his points straightforwardly and by using concrete daily experiences as examples to further provide explanations. It is also unique of him to tackle themes such as reflection, hope, and fidelity which are essential especially in today's time. However, the paper will only be focusing on specific topics and instances to limit the ideas to be discussed.

Marcel's philosophy of the existential fulcrum will be applied to a Fairview-UST bound student commuter. The act of everyday commuting will be treated in a phenomenological sense as a tool for a student's realization of his self. This will spring from the very philosophy of Gabriel Marcel. The paper shall enumerate and discuss "reflective elements" which are present and experienced in the daily act of commuting. These reflective elements are founded on its relation with the different themes of Marcel's philosophy. With its fullest research and study, this paper intends to apply Gabriel Marcel's philosophy of the existential fulcrum to the activity of everyday commute by answering what are the significant links between the aforementioned philosophy and the experience of commuting.

Main Discussion

In a very demanding environment today, man has been participative with the challenges of everyday living. As an incarnate subjectivity, man's body is continuously interactive among other beings which also have their own personal bodies as well. This active co-existence among men has established a collaborative connection that shares ideas, thoughts, and feelings that in time would develop to be new relationships. However, in the everyday course of survival, we tend to forget to look at the bigger picture of life. These are the relationships, events, and actions that we have forgotten to deal with a philosophical and

reflective attitude such as simply having the opportunity to study in a prestigious university, studying for exams, and even simply writing a term paper. A college student's situation is an example of a life immersed into the *broken world*.³

The academic field has required scholars of the various requisites which shall determine their intellectual capacity such as exams, papers, and recitations. However, these requirements are not only demanded inside the four walls of the classroom, but also beyond the learning arena, students battle with school works in our safe haven, our home. But in the case of students who live far from their university, what happens with the journey from school to their respective houses? To travel from one place to another on a daily basis requires a period of time. Commuting has been a day by day companion to most of college students, especially those who live at the Fairview area.⁴

Waking up two hours and a half earlier to prepare for school by eating breakfast, taking a bath, and cramming for the last night's task that was left undone due to heavy-eyed weariness from late night studying, are just some of the activities that a college commuter face every single day. The struggle to go to school does not end here, rather it starts when one waits for the right AUV or *Action Utility Vehicle* or some call it *fx* that has a signage of *Buendia*, *Quiapo*, or *Vito Cruz*. But after having found one, the question is, is there an available seat? And if there is one, is it for me, or for the lady beside me who was there even before I arrived and waited much longer than I did? Everyone has the same objective- to be able to get a ride.

The very first "reflective element" in which I would like to discuss the fact that as a student and an individual, I am not the only one who is struggling to get a ride. This I shall call the reflective element of *consideration of the Other*. During peak hour of 7 A.M., a sea of people is striving for their respective trips on their way to

the office, work, and schools while during 5 to 6 P.M., everyone is rushing to get a ride home. And, I belong to that sea of waiting people. Everyone has the same intention but each has a different story. If one would take time to examine the abundance of these people's presence in specific waiting places, he would be able to allot a moment to look at how the busy world regulates the daily routine of people by the hands of time. For students, teachers, and those in working offices, they are expected to be within the premises on or before the starting hours. Hence, a pursued college student along with other competing commuters will make it before his class starts by being able to get a ride on his way to UST.

Finally, to have a seat in a *Quiapo* bound AUV is the best feeling that a Thomasian could have to start his/her day right. But along this assurance of a journey is, again, the reflective element of the *consideration of the Other*. However, this is a more intimate reflection not only considering the physical distance between me and the other passengers but especially the given fact that, being in the same transportation vehicle, we have something in common. This mutual relation may not be the same destination but somehow, it may be the same route that we share. In a typical AUV, a number of ten to eighteen passengers (in the case of vans) are gathered to travel the same itinerary. While I share the same seat with these people, they appear to be strangers to me- but not until I leave the vehicle. I may not know their story but they would serve as building blocks to how I could enrich my identity.

An article by Mervin Jay Fernando published at *The Inquirer.net* entitled "The Five People You Meet in a Jeepney" portrays the variety of people that one may encounter in a jeepney ride. He classified the following as: 1) A few good men 2) Get a room 3) PUJ royalty and 4) Exploited youth. The fifth part of the article, "Reflection on the Galvanized Iron," provided the author's

thoughts on this observation. According to Fernando:

Filipinos pride themselves in saying that the jeepney is found only in the Philippines. It is a source of pride for us; it is part of our culture. However, as you alight from the jeepney, it seems nothing has changed. Though they are not in their seats, the people you encounter inside the jeepney are the same folks you see in our society: a few good men; opportunists; and inconsiderate individuals.⁵

Another significant *other* that is an essential reflective element in the phenomenology of commuting is of course, the captain of the ship; the driver. Having them around most of the time is often taken for granted. Some passengers get mad at them and even reprimand them in public when they are not brought to where they would like to get off to without even first considering the very fact that these drivers are just following the law and that they are only doing what is ought to be done because they are also workers. This is a very distressing truth that most passengers continue to do up to date, and having the aforementioned attitude results only to exercising *primary reflection* towards these people.

Primary reflection tends to dissolve the unity of experience which is first put out before it.⁶ Marcel defined primary reflection as dealing with the realm of the problematic. Thus, when we are faced with this kind of trouble, the solutions are provided right in front of us. In the case of drivers asking us our whereabouts, primarily we could respond, "*Dyan lang po sa UST.*" "*Bayad po dalawang UST kakasakay lang po.*" but if we would look deeper and really ask ourselves, "*Saan nga ba talaga ako pupunta?*". This question is a concern of one's presence of higher contemplation; *secondary reflection*. On the other hand, the function of secondary reflection is "essentially recuperative; it reconquers that unity which primary reflection dissolved."⁷

Hence going back to the very objective of the paper- to able to look at the daily act of commuting as an opportunity to reflect and contemplate on the everyday living moments we have taken for granted, we look into a deeper understanding of this daily habit. Especially as a student, being sent to school by our parents is a mystical journey and the everyday travelling through public transportation is a part of that expedition. Thus, the money we spend on fare is also something that is significant not only objectively but more importantly, something that is personal.

The money we pay for our trips is the sole fruition of our parents' hard work. A thirty- five peso fare from Fairview to UST is a big part of my education. It is one of the many ways of how our parents show their support and love for us and our education. But this money has a two-fold role in realizing one's existential being in this paper: first, as a personal bond between me as a student and my parents and the money being a tool for my education and second, an emolument for my trip which would be an instrument to help the driver with his profession and his family. These people behind the steering wheels also have families to support, thus the money we rightfully pay to them serves as a helping bridge between two people. Money may seem to be valuably significant today because of how people treat it to the extent of it being an exchange to someone's life but money in this paper is dealt as something philosophically reflective, which people of present time mostly have neglected.

After having discussed the *physical reflective elements* such as, 1.) people whom we share the act of commuting with, 2.) the driver, and 3.) money as (a) an icon of our parents' support to our education and (b). an emolument for our trip, the second part of the paper shall examine the *non-figurative reflective elements*. I shall begin with the route that a commuter from Fairview to UST-bound travels.

There are a number of destinations that for most people is either the first stop or the last stop. Along with these destinations is a story of the place. From Fairview to UST, there are three main areas that a commuter travels. One is the 12.4-kilometer Commonwealth Avenue. Predominantly, Commonwealth Avenue is known to be the widest highway in the Philippines. But along with this spacious road is an extensive narrative of how people in this location live.

Commuters are given the opportunity to have a peek on how these people strive to the demands of everyday living by selling goods along streets, such as bottled water, fruits and vegetables on push carts and the like. To be a witness on how different people live in a certain moment is a rare chance that some may have experienced but did not live with that experience. The status of life is really evident along streets. There are the unfortunate ones that sleep on paper cartons amidst the polluted boulevards and sadly, children also bear with this kind of living. If one would observe such situation from comfortably sitting in a public vehicle and being able to look at these people from the window, one would be full of hope for their situation, and by praying for them, one has offered a part of his availability for these people.

Marcel defined hope as that which provides strength for someone to continue to be himself in availability for other people.⁸ Hence, this kind of hope springs from humility. When one gives a moment to reflect upon this, he lets himself be there for the other. This kind of reflection that one may gain from a daily experience which is often times taken for granted, is what Marcel tries to impart as his existential fulcrum. That, it is through these day-to-day encounters with others that one may be able to know more of himself in relation to his availability to other people. From a perspective of a student commuter, the stagnant traffic of the flood-prone España Avenue has been a great teacher in awakening one's inner self

for the reason that there is more to it in just being a boulevard, but rather it could be a path towards one's personal reflective assessment.

Conclusion

I would conclude my paper in sharing a metaphor that is very much significant with the phenomenology of commuting. This metaphor is about a stoplight. Primarily, a stoplight has three indicating lights: red for stop, orange for slow down, and green for go. This metaphor of the stoplight has been a daily reminder for me for four years since the school where I graduate my secondary education has always posted this on classrooms.

But this stop light is fashioned as: **red** for **stop to make a decision**, **yellow** for **slow down and think of your actions**, and **green** as **go for the right decision**. This is a part of truth that Marcel would like people to understand from the little actions like the act of commuting. If we would take time to reflect while on the road, we could say that, life is like the daily act of commuting. It is a journey with bumps and stillness along the way, yet when we pass to certain locations and finally reach our destination, we somehow have enriched ourselves with a spec of the vast truth and reality. Hence this passage supports the said claim:

According to Marcel, truth is only a single aspect of reality, and is not the whole of reality. Truth may emerge from reality, but reality is more than truth. The fulfillment of truth, or the totality of all truths, may produce an inclusive reality. The universe may realize itself in the fulfillment of truth. However, the universe may also include things which are lacking in truth. Truth is both immanent and transcendent.⁹

Hence the truth in the phenomenology of commuting may just be a fragment of the grandiose reality but somehow teaches us the things that we could only for ourselves.

Marcel also argues that philosophic thought is reflective in that it may not only be concerned with the nature of human existence but may also be concerned with evaluating its own mode of being concerned with the nature of human existence. Reflection may be a process of recalling or reexamining our past experiences in order to understand them. Reflection may transform experiences into concepts. Marcel emphasizes that feeling is not passive, and that feeling is participation. However, participation is more than feeling. Participation is active engagement in the world.¹⁰

The philosophical project of Gabriel Marcel is the kind of philosophy that our present generation needs to learn. People of today have been living in the mode of *having* and have forgotten to live essentially with the mode of *being*.¹¹ We have been lying comfortable in the rabbit's fur without the courage to look at the eye of the magician. The broken world has been a home for broken people and broken relationships that are caused by being unavailable to others. We have neglected to take time to reflect on our lives. Thus, Marcel's philosophy is a reminder to everyone.

However, one's existential fulcrum is not attained with a one-time reflection only. Rather, the knowing and realizing of one's existential fulcrum is when we continuously cultivate ourselves for ourselves and for others. As Marcel once wrote in *The Mystery of Being*,

A really alive person is not merely someone who has a taste for life, but somebody who spreads that taste, showering it, as it were, around him; and a person who is really alive in this way has, quite apart from any tangible achievements of his, something essentially creative about him; it is from this perspective that -we can most easily grasp the nexus which, in principle at least, links creativity to existence...¹²

Hence, Gabriel Marcel's philosophy is a call to look back into ourselves so that we could look at life not just as fleeting moments but as phases of reflection and contemplation that it is through our little daily acts like *commuting* that we are somehow exposed to the vast, beautiful, and

meaningful reality lying right under our noses. If we only have the time and effort to look, then we would know.

¹ Seymour Cain, "Gabriel Marcel: French Philosopher and Author," in *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, accessed 24 December 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Gabriel-Honore-Marcel>.

² It is noticeable how Marcel uses situations in life as examples from where one could reflect upon his existence. One of the examples he mentioned in *The Mystery of Being* is when one tries to look for his watch in his pocket only to find out it is not there, one experiences a shock, or a *small break in the chain of his everyday habits*. His philosophical 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". Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Volume 1, trans. by G.S. Fraser (Chicago: H. Regnery Company, 1960), 41 and 78.

³ Marcel illustrated the *broken world* as the situation characterized by a refusal (or inability) to reflect, a refusal to imagine and a denial of the transcendent. There are three types of "unity" in the *broken world* according to Marcel: 1.) *Increased socialization of life*, 2.) *Extension of the powers of the State* and 3.) *This world has lost its true unity probably because privacy, brotherhood, creativeness, reflection and imagination, are all increasingly discredited in it*. Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, viii, 36-37.

⁴ Located at Quezon City, Fairview has been known as one of the busy districts in the north of Metro Manila with its various malls, parks (e.g. La Mesa Eco Park), food parks, schools, colleges, and other offices and business establishments.

⁵ Mervin Jay Fernando, "The Five People You Meet in a Jeepney," in *Inquirer.net*, 7 March 2014, accessed 20 May 2016, <http://lifestyle.inquirer.net/153353/the-five-people-you-meet-in-a-jeepney>.

⁶ Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, 93.

⁷ *Ibid*, 83.

⁸ Hope is the final guarantor of fidelity (a belief in someone); it is that which allows me not to despair, that which gives me the strength to continue to create myself in availability to the other. But this might appear to be nothing more than optimism—frequently misplaced, as events too often reveal—that things will turn out for the best. The person who hopes does not accept the current situation as final; however, neither does she imagine or anticipate the circumstance that would deliver her from her plight, rather she merely hopes for deliverance. See Brian Treanor and Brendan Sweetman, "Gabriel (-Honoré) Marcel," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2016, accessed 24 December 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/marcel/>

⁹ Jack, "Gabriel Marcel's Mystery of Being," in *Gabriel Marcel*, 12 May 2007, accessed 20 May 2016, www.gabrielmarcel.blogspot.com.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ Both *having* and *being* are modes or ways on how we encounter and relate with the world. "Having always implies an obscure notion of assimilation". Hence, the mode of *having* is our usual approach in dealing with the world as we ought to provide solutions to problems, like "What route should I take going to the mall?" It is somehow an objective attitude towards the world. On the other hand, the mode of *being* is a deeper and more concerned dealing with the world. "When one approaches the world with the attitude of 'being,' that world appears as something I participate in. I am immersed in it and it appears to me not as an object, but as a presence." See James P. Grace, "Philosophical Basis for Abandonment," in *opcentral.org*, 1986, accessed 24 Decemeber 2016, <http://opcentral.org/resources/2015/01/13/james-p-grace-a-philosophical-basis-for-abandonment/>.

¹² Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, 139.

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