SECULAR SACREDNESS:

APPLYING BUBER AND MARCEL TO PSYCHOTHERAPY

by

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I first examine the crisis in meaning facing modern society as articulated by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, two seminal figures in the existentialist tradition. Though their assessment is heavily informed by the cultural paradigm of late Christendom in which they lived, I interpret their points of view as remaining profoundly significant to modern and post-modern subjects navigating reality in contemporary times. After this, I turn to the work of both the Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel as well as the Jewish theologian Martin Buber to bring to light more subtle insights about human subjectivity implicit in the criticisms laid against modernity by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Although I am drawing heavily on the work of religious thinkers, I do so without affirming nor negating the belief in the existence of God. The ultimate aim of this paper is to advocate for an approach to psychotherapy which conceptualizes the psychotherapist's office as an intentional space to rekindle a secularized form of sacredness, one which can help human agents cultivate and realize their innate capacity for self-transcendence and authentic psychological sovereignty within the fundamentally dehumanizing culture of modernity.

I. Introductory Remarks

Modern society has delivered the self into an ambivalent existential situation. The advantages of the age cannot be overlooked. From modern medicine to the ubiquity of instant telecommunication, the rise of modernity has provided countless material benefits to humanity. Despite the many contemporary wonders of our age (and at times as an unintended consequence of them), the modern subject is afflicted by a crisis in meaning. In this paper, I plan to first draw from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, both of whose philosophies did a great deal in mapping out the meaning of this crisis, albeit within the cultural framework they were operating within at the end of the 19th century. After this, I will discuss the works of Gabriel Marcel and Martin Buber, both of whose analyses of this situation I see as an important key to adequately addressing it. By the end of my paper, I plan to demonstrate why I believe that applying Buberian insights to the occupation of psychotherapy can result in a model of therapy which revivifies a much-needed conception of the sacred, one adapted to a secular age.

Nietzsche & Kierkegaard: Prophets of Modernity

In order to understand the alienating qualities of the historical rise of modernity to the human subject, a brief account of two seminal 19th century thinkers, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, seems highly relevant. The modern world to which Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were responding is a direct product of the Enlightenment. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes the Enlightenment as "having its primary origin in

the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. The rise of the new science progressively undermines not only the ancient geocentric conception of the cosmos, but also the set of presuppositions that had served to constrain and guide philosophical inquiry in the earlier times." While most thinkers of their time unquestioningly assumed that the rapid changes to society spawned from the Enlightenment formed an unalloyed good, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were both deeply concerned with the effect this movement was having on the human individual.

As Guignon and Pereboom explain in *The Legacy of Existentialism*, "There is, in the modern world at least, an overwhelming pressure toward… 'normalization': the standardization of every region of life in order to produce and sustain a relatively regimented and manageable set of social practices… the fact that we have to play many different roles in our complex society means that our lives lack coherence and focus… As a result, we tend to be dispersed and distracted, lacking any real cohesiveness and integrity as individuals" (xxxi).

The way out of this empty conformism for both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche requires a profound attack on the inflated importance modern thinkers place on mere rationality, that is, a rationality divorced from the lived reality of human experience. In its place, they entreat their readers to cultivate a "life-transforming insight resulting from a profound emotion or affective experience" (xxxiii).

Though there is much overlap in Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's critiques of modern society's conformist ethos, as well as their shared suggestion that an emancipatory insight on the part of the individual is urgently needed in response to this ethos, their conceptions of the content of what this insight entails takes profoundly

different forms. This divergence is rooted in their different views of the nature and purpose of religious faith in human life.

Nietzsche believed that the rise of secularism in the wake of the Enlightenment had led to the erosion of modern man's ability to believe in the kind of purposeful universe which the pre-moderns had unquestioningly felt themselves a part of. Rather than being a monumental victory for humanity, wherein humans could be free to determine their moral systems in a rational manner independent of a superstitious authority-figure (a belief posited by many thinkers in his time, and which we see resonances of today in the work of 'New Atheists' like Dawkins and Harris), Nietzsche believed this event was a deeply tragic and traumatic one.

For Nietzsche, the cessation of faith in God as an absolute source of authority has forced upon humanity the seeds of a profound challenge, the fruits of which have yet to fully ripen. Humanity must now construct for themselves new systems of values which can somehow manage to generate meaning in the face of a seeming void of nothingness. He eloquently expresses this idea in his famous passage from *The Gay Science*: "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?" (125).

Against this backdrop of looming nihilism, Nietzsche saw his project as one in which he could begin a process of constructing new values for humans to meaningfully

live by. Since the sociological function of establishing ethical standards by anchoring them to the belief in absolute truth had been irrevocably destroyed by the death of God, Nietzsche could not construct his values by appealing to the conventional methodologies which had been deployed by the canon of moral philosophers which preceded him, as they were always working within the framework of assuming there was such thing as universal truth in the first place. In order to avoid an appeal to transcendent truth/God as the justification of either the Christian values which dominated the European culture he lived in, or any potential new values he might help create, he needed to come to understand the actual origin of moral values, which he believed had previously been hidden from us by the comforting belief in God.

To determine the true origin of morality, Nietzsche outlined what he called a genealogy of it. This is to say that Nietzsche looked back through history with the aim of constructing a narrative that could adequately explain the sociological and psychological drives which led to the development of Christian morality. In so doing, he could both understand how morality operates in general (so as to guide the construction of new set of values) and to understand how Christian morality specifically has informed our current historical situation, so as to ensure the creation of values which are effectively responsive to the particular moment he and his intellectual progeny found themselves in.

What Nietzsche determined had happened with the development of Christianity was a 'revaluation' of morality from the ancient world. In pre-Christian times, traits such as strength, vitality, and personal excellence were valorized, as these traits led to flourishing in life. In this kind of ethical system "goodness is associated with *exclusive virtues*. There is no thought that everyone should be excellent—the very idea makes no

sense, since to be excellent is to be distinguished from the ordinary run of people. In that sense, [pre-Christian] valuation arises out of a 'pathos of distance'...expressing the superiority excellent people feel over ordinary ones, and it gives rise to a 'noble morality' " (Anderson).

The rise of Christianity, in Nietzsche's eyes, was a kind of power-move on behalf of those who were too mediocre, weak, or timid to prosper in this value system. The previously referenced article explains:

"People who suffered from oppression at the hands of the noble, excellent, (but uninhibited) people valorized by [pre-Christian] morality... developed a persistent, corrosive emotional pattern of resentful hatred against their enemies, which Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. That emotion motivated the development of the new moral concept <evil>, purpose-designed for the moralistic condemnation of those enemies... Afterward, via negation of the concept of evil, the new concept of goodness emerges, rooted in altruistic concern of a sort that would inhibit evil actions. Moralistic condemnation using these new values... would accomplish a 'radical revaluation' that would corrupt the very *values* that gave the noble way of life its character and made it seem admirable in the first place."

While there is much nuance to Nietzsche's views of Christianity, for the purpose of this paper, suffice to say that on the whole, he felt the development of Christian morality to be profoundly unhealthy for humanity. He believed that if we were to look at human existence as it actually is, we would observe that in spite of all the beautiful rhetoric throughout the ages about the higher nature of man, what we fundamentally are is (just like all of nature) the chaotic unfolding of basic drives and instincts. In order for

the Christian moral system to successfully convince so many potentially powerful humans to debase themselves in support of the weak, it had to posit a fictitious rendering of the world, wherein the denial of our drives would result in some cosmic reward *after* this life.

For Nietzsche, this moral imperative to cut oneself off from the passional, instinctual dimensions of human existence is inherently anti-nature and akin to a kind of spiritual or psychological sickness plaguing humanity. Whatever new values are to come in the wake of Christianity, they will need to rid themselves of the life-denying aspects of Christianity which he believed were having a deleterious effect on humanity. To this end, Nietzhche proposed what he called a 'spiritualization of the passions,' wherein mankind would honor their fundamental drives instead of pursuing the delusional hope that they could somehow change themselves into some socially derived self-image of what they should be (and compulsively beating themselves up with guilt for never succeeding at this unattainable goal).

Kierkegaard, a devout (albeit quite idiosyncratic) Christian, has a profoundly different take on the nature of Christianity and its relation to ethics. In his view, "the conceptual distinction between good and evil is ultimately dependent not on social norms but on God" (McDonald). Though he would agree with Nietzsche that modern society has brought with it a profound assault on conventional conceptions of faith (and I would suspect he may even be receptive to some of Nietzsche's critiques on how formal religious structures can function in a way which invites people to diminish the fullness of their being in exchange for the anguish-lulling comfort of conformity), he would

certainly disagree that humanity's capacity for genuine faith has been extinguished in the way Nietzsche seems to be indicating in his proclamation of the 'death of God.'

Like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard is deeply troubled by what he sees as an encroaching nihilism in our culture. In *Fear and Trembling*, he offers a description of the nihilism he is combatting which is just as elegant (if not more so) than Nietzche's remarks on the death of God. He writes: "if there were no sacred bonds which knit mankind together, if one generation followed upon another like leaves in the forest, if one generation succeeded another like the song of birds in the wood, if each generation passed through the world like a ship through the sea or like a wind through the desert, a vain and fruitless thing: if eternal oblivion like a hungry animal lay in wait for her prey and there was no power strong enough to snatch it from her, how hollow and without consolation life would be!" (Kierkegaard 400).

While Nietzsche proposes that the religious crisis presented by modernity is the total dissolution of our ability to maintain faith in God, Kierkegaard asserts that the problem is that we have been led astray into a profoundly deep and insidious misunderstanding of what faith actually *is*. This misunderstanding arises from the overemphasis modern thinkers have put on rationality. Kierkegaard's critique of the primacy of rationality at the basis of the Enlightenment could be put simply: if you're a hammer, everything's a nail.

It is fundamental to the deployment of reason to avoid logical paradoxes. This rational, logical method of inquiring is very effective in its various aims, and has obviously given modern man a great deal of technological control over the environment. Though this kind of inquiry has it's appropriate uses, when it comes to faith, reason is not

capable of penetrating its mysterious qualities. This is because, for Kierkegaard, Christian dogma "embodies paradoxes which are offensive to reason. The central paradox is the assertion that the eternal, infinite, transcendent God simultaneously became incarnated as a temporal, finite, human being (Jesus). There are two possible attitudes we can adopt to this assertion, viz. we can have faith, or we can take offense. What we cannot do, according to Kierkegaard, is believe by virtue of reason. If we choose faith we must suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason. In fact we must believe *by virtue of the absurd* " (McDonald).

It seems that Kierkegaard would agree with Nietzsche on two important points; that the world would be a dismal place for humanity if not for God's existence and that the belief in God is a rationally untenable position. However, for Kierkegaard, this untenability does not destroy our capacity for faith, it is actually precisely the opposite. It is a necessary structural feature of faith that it is only engaged with through non-rational means. The limits of rationality serve as the very threshold of faith. It's not that we can't locate God because we killed Him, Kierkegaard might say, it's more like we're using a flame to locate darkness. Everywhere we put our lamp, the darkness recedes, and our default response is to pour ever more fuel into the fire.

Now that I have (in extremely broad-brush strokes) characterized the views of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, I will say that I did this not to necessarily advocate for one position or the other regarding whether it is possible or worthwhile to believe in God. I am suggesting, at least for the purposes of this essay, that we put that question aside. My interest in outlining the views of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard was rather to show how the historical emergence of modernity forced upon at least some segments of the modern

subject, as exemplified by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, a profoundly felt urge to hold on to a sense of human meaning of deeper significance than that which is generally offered in the age of modernity. In this way, these thinkers could be seen as prophets for the secular age we inhabit. By this I mean that they were earnestly trying to outline cognitive maps which would serve the function of criticizing the generally unacknowledged unintended consequences of the rise of modernity. Whatever one thinks of their particular philosophical conclusions, the fact that they had something significant to discuss about the crisis in human meaning can not be handwaved away. To further assess the details of the existential crisis modern humanity faces, I will now turn to the work of Gabriel Marcel.

Gabriel Marcel: The Distinction Between Problem and Mystery

Marcel, a mid-20th century Christian existentialist and a contemporary of Sartre, was highly critical of modern society. For Marcel, like many existentialists, the rise of modernity has ushered in an age wherein the default valorization of instrumental reason has resulted in the erosion of mankind's innermost need for spiritual reflection. The modern subject finds themselves pressured by the apparatus of society to lose touch with their inherent capacity for genuine ontological self-reflection.

A famous example Marcel uses to explain this idea is the case of a person employed as a subway token distributor. Someone with this job will find him or herself in a mechanized role, and, at least while engaged in their shift, they will be operating mostly on auto-pilot, exchanging currencies for subway tokens. Though they will interact with a large amount of people on a daily basis (almost definitely more people

than they would have ever been exposed to in a pre-modern society), they will not encounter any of them on an intimate level. In fact, if intimacy were to erupt to the surface, this would be experienced as a disturbance to the efficiency of the system. For instance, if someone were so distracted by the grief of their mother that they misplaced their money and so were desperately trying to find it, they would be interpreted as someone holding up the line. In this way, the token distributor and the token recipient are both reduced to being mere cogs in a vast machine. It is important to note that Marcel is not only making the merely obvious point that this mode of being is superficial and psychologically undesirable, but rather, a more pernicious, ontological crisis is being exposed here, as summarized by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

"What can the inner reality of such a person be like? What began as tedious work slowly becomes infuriating in its monotony, but eventually passes into a necessity that is accepted with indifference, until even the sense of dissatisfaction with the pure functionalism of the task is lost. The unfortunate truth is that such a person may come to see herself, at first unconsciously, as merely an amalgamation of the functions she performs. There is the function of dispensing tokens at work, the function of spouse and parent at home, the function of voting as a citizen of a given country, etc. Her life operates on a series of 'time-tables' that indicate when certain functions—such as the yearly maintenance trip to the doctor, or the yearly vacation to rest and recuperate—are to be exercised. In this person the sense of wonder and the *exigence* for the transcendent may slowly begin to wither and die. In the most extreme cases, a person who has come to identify herself with her functions ceases to even have any intuition that the world is broken."

For Marcel, it is this fundamental, ontological devotion to mere functionality on the part of modern subjects that urgently needs to be addressed in our time. In order for us to combat this modern tendency towards becoming automated selves, we must recollect and actualize our obscured capacity for genuine philosophical and spiritual reflection. The key to this, Marcel suggests, is to acknowledge that the modern epistemological paradigm, that which undergirds the practices of modern science and the entire structure of modern society, is an outgrowth of an ontological orientation on the part of subjects which has taken root in modernity. When a culture of humans conceptualizes its relationship to reality in any particular way, that culture's standards for what constitutes knowledge and truth flow downstream from this ontological orientation. In the modern world, according to Marcel, the downstream epistemological effects of our unexamined ontological orientation is that we focus only on 'the realm of the problematical' to the exclusion of 'the realm of the mystery'.

Though the words 'problem' and 'mystery' get thrown around loosely in common discourse, Marcel has in mind a technical distinction between these two terms. A *problem* is an issue in the world which can be addressed objectively. In order for it to be addressed objectively, the subject who is trying to solve the problem must, him or herself, be completely separated from the object, and vice versa. An obvious example of this is a simple mathematical equation, such as "2+2=?". It has no bearing on the truth of that equation whether Jeff Bezos claims the answer to be "4" or a poor beggar does. Each person's unique experience and subjectivity is completely irrelevant. The whole point of an objective claim to truth is that it exists entirely independently of the person claiming it. This orientation is what gives rise to our capacity to engage in the scientific method. The

disadvantage of this default orientation is that it tends to minimize our subjective experience, and thus has a tendency to turn human beings into interchangeable units in the pursuit of objectivity.

Unlike the way the Romantic movement tended to respond to modernity, Marcel is careful here to not "throw the baby out with the bathwater" in regards to rationality, so to speak. Marcel would say there are a very large number of issues we contend with in life that are of this problematical nature, and both modern science and modern society more broadly have done a great job of responding to this realm of human experience. He does not see this capacity humans have to engage with the world objectively as inherently oppressive, and thus he does not suggest we rebel against it in fits of irrationality, for instance. Instead, he thinks that, while acknowledging and recognizing the beneficial aspects of objective reasoning, we must resist the premise that this objective framing of the world is the *only* relevant framing. It is on this point that he articulates his conception of the realm of the mystery.

Existential issues which fall under the category of *mystery*, Marcel insists, have a fundamentally different ontologically structured subject than those of problems. A mystery, for Marcel, is a "problem which encroaches on its own data" (Marcel 19). What Marcels means here is that mysteries are a peculiar set of problems, wherein when the subject tries to solve them in the way they would any other objective problem, they discover that they themselves are part of what they are trying to understand. This kind of problem is "meta-problematic; it is a question in which the identity of the questioner becomes an issue itself.... To change the questioner would be to alter the question. It

makes every difference who is asking the question when confronting a mystery"
(Treanor).

The kind of inquiry demanded (and by extension, the kind of knowledge achieved) when genuinely engaging with a mystery is *participatory* in nature. In order to exemplify this, we may consider the mystery of grief. When someone deeply close to me dies, I find myself engulfed in a kind of problem. The formal, rational articulation of this problem is "How in the world can I continue to live without this person whose existence in my life I previously took for granted?" This is not the same kind of problem as "2+2=?" because unlike the latter, wherein any random person could be replaced by anyone else and achieve the same answer, my love for this person (and my despair at how unceremoniously they were ripped from my life) is *precisely* the very data I am forced to engage with. I am structurally incapable of separating myself from myself the way I would separate myself from "2+2=4". To universalize this experience is to negate it. Though others may understand the abstract concept of grief, nobody else can understand *my* history with this loved one, the things I wish *I'd* said but never did, the little things *I* notice in *my* mundane life which *I* want to share with *this particular loved one* but cannot.

If we are to take Marcel's realm of the mystery seriously (which I certainly do), I believe that the ideal aim of the psychotherapist should be to carve out a space in the alienating culture of secular modernity, within which the patient is afforded support in engaging with this dimension of human experience. The therapist must guard themselves against the modernist tendency to reduce the mysterious dimension of human life into just another objective problem to be solved. Taking the mystery of grief again, the

psychotherapist must not reduce their patient's grief to a mere psychological or neurological state. Of course, in a certain sense, to say that grief is a neuropsychological state is not entirely incorrect. But to postulate that grief is *reduceable* to the chemical interaction in the brain that emerges during grief and to then treat it by simply prescribing an anti-depressant, for instance, is a fundamental error in my opinion.

Now that this distinction between the realm of the problematical and the realm of the mysterious has been fleshed out, I will soon move on to my assessment of the work of Martin Buber, a 20th Jewish theologian and existentialist philosopher, whose insights I believe can help a great deal in explaining my position that the psychotherapist can offer a space for the rekindling of the sacred in a secular age. Before I do that, though, I should make a few brief remarks about what I mean when I use the word *sacred* in this context.

The Sacred

Merriam-Webster defines the word *sacred* as follows:

1a: dedicated or set apart for the service or worship of a deity (i.e. a tree *sacred* to the gods_

1b: devoted exclusively to one service or use (as of a person or purpose) (i.e.a fund *sacred* to charity)

2a: worthy of religious veneration : HOLY

2b: entitled to reverence and respect

3: of or relating to religion : not secular or profane i.e. *sacred* music

4 *archaic* : ACCURSED

5a: UNASSAILABLE, INVIOLABLE

5b: highly valued and important (i.e. a *sacred* responsibility)

My employment of this term is meant to bring together all senses of the word *sacred* as outlined above except '1a' and '4'. I don't anticipate anyone being particularly worried about my exclusion of definition 4, given that it is an archaic use of the word. However, I could anticipate an understandable reaction against my exclusion of the first definition. I can imagine both theists and atheists alike accusing me of cherry picking the definitions of the term which enable me to make my point, and conveniently leaving behind the most controversial definition, the one which they each insist from different perspectives is the most crucial to leave in. A theist might argue that to sever the notion of the sacred from a deity is to dislocate it from the source from which it is a coherent concept at all. The atheist might agree on this point, advocating that we rid ourselves of both the concept of a deity and the accompanying concept of the sacred. In some important ways, both of these potential critiques are reminiscent of the divide I was outlining earlier between Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's perspectives on faith. To both these critics I would say that they are correct in their accusation towards me. While this debate about the existence or nonexistence of God is obviously an important debate to be had, it is not the area that I am focused on for the purposes of this paper. I do not see my cherry-picking tendencies as an act of sophistry on my part, however, but rather as the offering of a truce between both sides of this holy war.

The fact of the matter is that we moderns live within a pluralistic and secular society. While theists, atheists, and everyone in between are all entitled to advocate for their opinion as to the status of the existence of God, the question of God's existence has

no bearing on what I am focused on in this paper. I am concerned with recovering a sense of the sacred which is not dependent upon a belief in the existence of God. We must be very nuanced here. I am also decidedly *not* asserting a definition of the sacred dependent on a Godless world. My notion of sacredness is neither godless, not "god-ful", so to speak. My hope is to argue for a conception of the sacred which both a theist and an atheist could understand and employ in their lives, without having to agree or disagree with the position of those on the other side of the question of the belief in God. In the same way that one's belief or disbelief in God has no ultimate bearing on their ability to practice science, one's belief or lack of belief in God has no bearing on whether they can pragmatically cultivate a sense of the sacred in the way in which I mean it.

With this point made clear, I will detail what I mean when I say the psychotherapist's role should be to rekindle a sense of the sacred in a secular context. I will articulate the way each sub-definition of the word *sacred* as outlined before matches the vision I have for what should go on in a therapist's office. The reader can cross-reference the original definition of the word I included earlier and hopefully deduce my reasoning for each point.

1b: The relationship between the psychotherapist and the patient should be devoted exclusively to the service of helping the patient to uncover the dimension of mystery in their life and to use this dimension to help transcend the crises that confront them. The therapist is not a friend, a coworker, a disciplinarian, or even a doctor. The therapist is a midwife to the realm of the mystery.

2a: The relationship between the psychotherapist and the patient should be treated with religious veneration. This will be explained more in definition 3.

2b: The psychotherapist must treat every patient with reverence and respect. To the extent possible, this attitude should be reciprocated by the patient.

3: The relationship between the psychotherapist and the patient is a religious one. The etymological root of the term 'religion' is the Latin word *religare*, which means "to bind." To say that this relationship is religious is to say that both the conscious and unconscious parts of each individual is oriented towards binding oneself to the other and to that which transcends them both in the process of psychotherapy.

5a: The psychotherapist must be always vigilant against their own capacity to corrupt the spirit of their sacred relationship with their patient. This includes (but is not limited to): not allowing oneself to develop romantic feelings towards their patient, not treating their patient as a mere means to an end (including the end of money), and not forgetting that any given moment of genuine existential inquiry within therapy has never happened before and will never happen again and is thus precious by definition.

5b: The willingness of both the psychotherapist and the patient to embark on this process is inherently valuable and important.

The vision I have described here is one in which the spatial-temporal phenomenon of a therapist engaged in dialogue with their patient is experienced as something fundamentally distinct from what is generally promoted and discoverable for humans in modern society. While most of modern society is structured in a way which incentivizes an insensitivity to the realm of the mystery, the psychotherapist's office is defined precisely against this backdrop, and thus to enter the therapist's office of your own

accord is to invite into your life a willingness to participate in the realm of the mystery as articulated by Marcel.

Now that I have brought some elucidation to what I mean by my use of the word 'sacred,' I will spend a bit of time explaining Martin Buber's work, and the way in which it can be applied to the project of rekindling the kind of secularized sacredness I just outlined.

Martin Buber's I-Thou Relationship

One of the ideas that Martin Buber is most famous for is his reflection on the importance of cultivating an '*I-Thou*' relationship. Buber believed that the self and the other, while ontologically and phenomenologically separated, are co-defining in their essential natures. Put simply, when anyone experiences themselves as a subject, as an *I*, they experience themselves implicitly related to one of two potential other phenomena. Either they are an *I* in relation to an *It* or they are an *I* in relation to a *Thou*. I will try to make this distinction between an *I-It* and an *I-Thou* relationship clearer momentarily, but I want to first emphasize that for Buber, there is no "I" without an other to relate itself to, whether that be another person, the presence of some inanimate object that one stands in relation to, or God.

As I previously explained, I will be putting any metaphysical assertion of the existence of God to the side. Even if we assume there is no God (which I am only assuming here for the sake of argument, as ultimately my aim is to neither advocate for nor against God's existence), it seems undeniable that humans tend to relate to their own

existence in a way that is psychologically equivalent to the way Buber conceptualizes humanity's relationship to God. Even the most ardent atheist will, in times of crisis or inexpressible joy, view themselves as a kind of character before an audience. If we examine the internal narratives of our lives closely, we will notice that they bend and shift from hour to hour, day to day, month to month, and year to year. One moment we are a victim, the next a torturer. In this moment I deserved my trauma, in this moment I did not. Any given way we decide to act — our limited but real capacity for free choice — is always simultaneously emerging from, constrained by, and taking a stand in some way either for or against, the interpretations of our lives we find ourselves always already contending with. Even if there is not an actual deity observing our lives, they are unavoidably lived *as if* there is.

In Buber's schema, an *I-It* relationship "assumes the fixed form of objects that one can measure and manipulate" (Zank). An example of this could be the way I am relating to the keys on the keyboard I am typing on right now. Generally speaking, I use them for the ends of the moment, i.e. writing this paper. As I reflect on them, and try to be attentive to the way they feel under my fingers as I press on them, or perhaps as I try to keep in my mind some idea of the material and historical processes that have come together to bring them about as an existent phenomena of experience at all, a new orientation begins to emerge, that of an *I-Thou*.

As an *I-Thou* relationship emerges between oneself and the other that one is in relationship to, the dynamic between the self and the other "transforms each figure into an ultimate and mysterious center of value whose presence eludes the concepts of instrumental language" (Zank). By appreciating the mysterious, existential presence of

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my keyboard, I am simultaneously experiencing *myself* as a mysterious, existential

presence. When my self is struck by the strangeness of the fact that there is such a thing

as a keyboard at all, this feeling arises from being struck by the strangeness that there

should be *anything at all.* When I find myself struck by the strangeness that there should

be anything at all, I am implicitly struck by the inexplicable strangeness that *I* should be

one of these existing things.

While I used the simple example of my computer keyboard to help explain the

basic idea that Buber is articulating, the more fascinating and significant examples of *I-It*

and *I-Thou* relationships are those which manifest between two human beings. To

understand how an *I-It* relationship between two people manifests, we can remember the

previously discussed example of Marcel's subway token distributor. In the relationship

between the subway worker and the people they are interacting with, each subject's

subjectivity is unacknowledged and thus their innate capacities for intersubjective

dialogue is obscured. If the subway coin distributor were to allow themselves to stop

identifying as their functional role as a cog in the apparatus of the subway system, and in

so doing, to expose themselves to the vulnerability and raw existential presence of the

humans they encounter, their relationship with others could shift from an *I-It* to and *I-*

Thou. It is this capacity humans have to shift from an *I-It* relationship to an *I-Thou*

relationship which I believe must be cultivated in psychotherapeutic practice in order to

afford the urgently needed sacred possibility of self-transcendence in our secular, modern

society.

Now that I have adequately articulated some of the fundamental positions of

Martin Buber, I will describe in more practical detail how a Buberian approach to

intersubjectivity can be manifested in a therapeutic context. In so doing, I hope to make a credible case for how cultivating this approach can help the patient to more intimately embrace the mysterious dimension of life which Marcel pointed to in order to overcome the obstacles they face in their life.

Applying Buber and Marcel to Psychotherapy

In order to establish how the insights, I have discussed from Marcel and Buber can be applied to psychotherapy, I'd like to first explain how the approach I am advocating differs from that of the clinical psychopharmacological model commonly assumed by most practicing psychiatrists. Clinical psychopharmacology is a "specialty field within clinical psychology dedicated to the study and therapeutic use of psychotropic medication, in addition to traditional psychological interventions, for the treatment of mental disorders and promotion of overall patient health and well-being" ("Clinical Psychopharmacology"). I believe that there are many times when dealing with patients where the use of pharmaceuticals is completely acceptable, such as in a state of profound psychosis, or a depression so debilitating that the patient can't even get out of bed, much less engage in a penetrating and vulnerable dialogue with their therapist. I want to be very clear that my criticism with the predominate psychiatric model today is not arising from a knee-jerk rejection of the use of pharmaceuticals, as such. I do have criticisms of the degree to which the use of psychiatric medication has increasingly become the first resort response to psychological issues, as well as the degree to which psychiatric medications are prescribed by psychiatrists without any attendant suggestion of psychotherapy. By and large, though, my most fundamental critique is of the fact that the basic structure of the clinical pharmacological model is one in which the patient's

psyche is reduced to the body and then seen as a kind of complex machine that needs to be fixed. The average psychiatrist who subscribes to this perspective sees their role in helping their patient as analogous to a mechanic helping a faulty car engine. All they must do is pop the hood, role up their sleeves, and tinker with a variety of material parts until the overall structure returns to working order.

I see this very approach, that of seeing the patient as a complex machine, as a manifestation of Buber's *I-It* relationship, wherein the patient is treated as manipulatable object. It is important to note here that I do not believe that *I-It* relationships are inherently problematic. If we have cancer and go to the doctor, it is important that the doctor in some sense reduce us to an object for a period of time so as to correctly diagnose our disease and prescribe treatments. I just do not believe that the role of psychotherapy should be seen as entirely analogous to a medical doctor in this way. As I said previously, there are justifiable situations wherein this approach is warranted, but the tendency that needs to be corrected is the over-application of this approach. Put simply, I believe that in the predominate psychopharmacological paradigm, the old expression is applicable, "when you're a hammer, everything's a nail." This is to say that since prescribing pharmaceutical drugs is the default approach for many psychiatrists, it doesn't occur to people operating in this psychopharmacological model that there may be a more subtle and philosophically informed approach to psychotherapy, such as the one I am advancing. Though many psychiatrists would say they are scientists, and thus are not particularly interested in philosophy, in reality they often are subscribing to an implicit positivist form of philosophy. This positivist worldview generally leads such people to reject other forms of philosophy as obsolete or incoherent, if not superstitious quackery.

As I have said many times, I am an advocate for science, and believe it has much to offer psychotherapeutic practice, particularly evidence based programs such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. The element of nuance I am trying to bring to the conversation here is just to point out that no psychologist (not even those who claim philosophy is inferior to science) is operating in a field as scientifically rigorous as a medical doctor. Psychological disturbance is, in very important ways, a more complex phenomenon than simple physical disease such as cancer. There is a biological dimension at play, to be sure, but there are also social, interpretive, existential, and spiritual dimensions as well.

I believe that in dealing with the Marcelian mystery of grief, if a clinician attempts to address their client's despair by merely prescribing them an antidepressant, they are adopting an utterly insufficient approach. This sort of intervention may be needed in some situations as a short-term strategy of, for instance, keeping the patient from embracing suicidal ideation or to help them muster the energy to get out of bed, but such intervention is ultimately *symptomatic*. To really get at the heart of the grief requires a mutual willingness between a qualified psychotherapist and their patient to embrace their mysterious capacity for an *I-Thou* relationship, and to provide a space for the patient to deeply reflect on their relationship with their lost loved one.

As a psychotherapist affords the space for this deeper ontological reflection, the possibility of spontaneously emerging insights can emerge. With such insights, the human being is able to formulate novel conceptions of their life's meaning and break new ground in terms of actualizing new modes of being which help to psychologically and spiritually heal from profound trauma and the manifold ways we tend to stunt our own

development with self-sabotaging narratives. This is to say that in the model of psychotherapy I am proposing, something analogous to what is offered in Catholic confession can take place in a secularized context. Humans can dig into their own subjective experience, deeply and penetratingly reflect upon it, and in so doing, open themselves up to the possibility of forgiveness and healing needed to transcend that which had previously been limiting them.

An understandable question may be raised, given the basic schema I have laid out here. That is, quite simply: "Why bother with all of this?" Perhaps, it could be argued, the vision I have laid out here is just an obsolete conception of human nature, unfalsifiable, and thus, if nothing else, a pseudo-scientific waste of time. Given that psychotherapy is broadly understood as a practice dedicated to helping patients feel healthy and to thrive, then it follows to reason that jettisoning the lofty existential themes I bring up here, and focusing instead on pragmatic techniques like CBT or pharmacology just seems like the most efficient thing to do.

To this, I would say that one of the axioms underlying the approach I am laying out is a criticism of this unquestioned reverence for efficiency in modern society. It's so fundamental to our experience that, much like fish unaware of the water they're swimming in, we tend to not even recognize it. I think that at the most ultimate level, the benefits of the approach I am outlining are more qualitative than quantitative. In a manner very akin to the work of Viktor Frankl, I am suggesting an approach to therapy that really is not particularly efficient. I do not see why this inherently a problem, though. It is often the inefficiency of our philosophical, spiritual, and humanistic endeavors, which make them so precious and rewarding.

An analogy that comes to mind is that of scaling a mountain. Of course, taking a helicopter to the top would be much more efficient than climbing. You could quickly get dropped off at the zenith, delight in a mesmerizing view, and have many great photographs to show others. Still, is there not something deep inside us that intuitively feels we would respect ourselves more deeply if we went through the rigorous training and dedication needed to scale the mountain by foot? It seems to me that some profound part of the human condition is profoundly sustained by a variety of things which any reasonable person would consider to be profoundly inefficient.

There is, in many contemporary circles of academia, a deep mistrust of the existentialist tradition. From scientific communities, there is the accusation that existentialism suffers from insufficient scientific rigor. From various multi-culturally minded academics, there is the accusation that existentialism is too Eurocentric and too prone to proto-fascistic nostalgia. These accusations (and, I'm sure, many others I have not yet even been exposed to) have their credible points. I am not in this essay trying to assert that there are no problematic excesses in the existentialist tradition to critically resist and temper. I am merely making a case that there is something vitally important to the human experience captured in the sorts of existentialist perspectives I have been offering, and that we jettison them from our worldview at our own peril.

In a world of increasing complexity, where the human subject is perpetually bombarded with more and more information (more than it could ever fully integrate, even), it is my contention that the best of what the existentialist tradition has to offer is sorely needed. It is my hope that psychotherapy be viewed as a forum through which genuine spiritual and psychological sovereignty can be attained. I believe this

emancipatory vision of the human condition is more important now than ever before, as our challenges have become so great. From emergent geopolitical crises, to the rise of misinformation on the internet, to a totalizing erosion in public trust in both the U.S. and around the world, the crises of our time indicate an emergency which commands a response. My hope is that the model of psychotherapy I am suggesting here can aid in some small way towards the creation of sovereign selves, whose cultivation of genuine dignity have primed them to respond to the cries of the world with a sense of immediacy, a sense of resolve, and a sense of compassionate concern.

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