

OSU DENIGRATION IN IGBO LAND AND GABRIEL MARCEL'S ETHIC OF INTERRELATIONS

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Abstract

The human person is a product of interrelations. From the very beginning, he is wired to live in close communication with fellowmen in the society; hence, the saying, "No man is an Island." Even though no man is an Island, there is yet a very unsettling, vocal, and strong force natural to all men that pushes man to assert his ego- the "I" and seek his interest 'alone' in whatever he does. This drive left untamed, makes man worse than a demented beast. In this lies the challenge in contracting and maintaining a mutually beneficial human relationship, even in marriage. Gabriel Marcel saw this challenge and proffered a solution to it in his ethic of interrelations. To maintain balanced subject-subject relations Marcel posits that the ego must be tamed and made to see the interests of the 'other' as its interests. This article studies Marcel's philosophy of dialogue. It employs Marcel's viewpoint to resolve the age-long denigrative practice of the Osu Caste System in Igbo land. The article finds that the denigration suffered by the Osu is a consequence of a subconscious lapse in the Igbo mentality that led to the equalization of the Osu's being to that of a mere 'dirty' animal that must be avoided always. Marcel's ethic of interrelations can restore the damages due to this 'subconscious lapse' if imbibed by the Igbo.

Keywords: Dialogue, Ethics, Igbo, Interrelations, Intersubjectivism, Osu Caste, Relationship.

Introduction

In *Animal Farm*, we read the ironic pronouncement “All animals are equal but some are more equal than others.” This philosophy, as unethical as it sounds, unfortunately, depicts perfectly the true state of affairs in human society. We are all men born to fellowmen; some from the same cultures and religions; others from different cultures and religions. Yet we are all creatures with body and soul condemned to the same fate- birth and death. In spite of the natural equality that exists among all men, the forces of existence, most times beyond human control, often confers privileges on some that position them above others in society. Hence, some become kings, others artisans; some doctors, others barrow pushers; some extremely rich, others terribly poor. This set the template for the discordant tone of discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization in the society; the strong, rich and mighty, lord it over the weak, poor and lowly. Privileges are used as vantages to unleash terror on the less privileged and disadvantaged. Civilization after civilization, the problem of inequality continues to wreak immeasurable havoc on the foundations of justice and fairness in society. Apparently, man is condemned to live perpetually in the state of nature- a state of lawlessness where might is right.

Gabriel Marcel saw the problem in human society and decided to address it through his dialogical philosophy. His ethic of interrelations based on his philosophy of intersubjectivity is an attempt to rescue man from his seemingly naturally egoistic frame that often turns him into an insatiable beast longing for blood. Marcel's philosophy has projected a paradigm that would enable men to cohabit peacefully in a society devoid of all forms of selfishness. This philosophy is founded on the common essence of the human person accruing from our shared dignity. Marcel suggests that since all men are essentially equal, they should be able to live together happily if all realize that the person next to them is a mirror of himself. Hence, the human relationship must be devoid of all ego-centred considerations. The interests of the “I” in any relationship he engages in should not be his but that of the “You” he is relating with. The same is expected of the “You” to the “I”. In this wise, at every instance of a relationship, the interests of the “You” are always the factor that matters. The ego is silenced.

This study considers Marcel's doctrine as a paradigm that may be employed to tame a seemingly untameable beast undermining the ideal human relations in Igbo land- the *Osu* Caste System. The *Osu*- a one-time privileged and adored social status in Igbo communities is today vilified. This article sees the disparagement suffered by the *Osu* as resulting from a subconscious lapse in the Igbo consciousness that led to the reduction of the *Osu*'s being to that of a mere 'thing'. Consequently, the Igbo began to see the *Osu* who he initially adored as a beast to be avoided and vilified. Marcel's ethic of interrelations is projected in this article as a paradigm that would enable the Igbo to rediscover the true nature of the *Osu*, and hence, re-establish normal subject-subject relations with them.

Brief Biography and Philosophical Orientation of Gabriel Marcel

Gabriel Marcel is a French philosopher, dramatist, and critic. He was born in Paris in 1889 and died in 1973. His mother died when he was four years old. He was raised in a home dominated by the cultured agnosticism of his father and the liberal, moralistic Protestantism of his aunt.¹ The shaking experiences of World War 1, during which he was an official of the Red Cross concerned with locating missing soldiers, brought home to him the failure of abstract philosophy to cope with the tragic character of human existence.² His conversion to Catholicism in 1929 did not substantially alter the direction of his thought, although it intensified his conviction that the philosopher must take into consideration the logic interior to faith and hope.

Marcel's name has most often been linked to 'theistic existentialism'. However due to the ambiguities of this term and the association of existentialism in the popular mind with Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy to which he is almost diametrically opposed, Marcel has preferred the designation 'Neo-Socratic' for his thought. This should not obscure Marcel's contributions to existential philosophy or his similarity to other thinkers who are ordinarily associated with it. Note that before the publication of the major works of Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, two of Gabriel Marcel's works (*Existence and Objectivity* and *Metaphysical*

Journal) introduced into French philosophy many of the themes that later became central to existentialism.

Often adopting an independently developed phenomenological method, Marcel dealt with such themes as participation, incarnation, man as being in the world, and the priority of existence over-abstraction (the *cogito*) as a starting point for philosophy. Marcel's critique of idealism and his defense of faith resemble Soren Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's idealism. Marcel, unlike Kierkegaard, refused to accept that faith is an irrational leap or that the individual stands alone in his faith. Heidegger and Marcel explored much of the same terrain in their objective to restore the "ontological weight to human existence."³ They share a common view of the nature of truth and language. Marcel, however unlike Heidegger, includes within his ontology the assurance of fulfillment that is part of faith's apprehension of God as Absolute Presence. In many ways, Martin Buber has been Marcel's closest contemporary philosophical relative. Each has independently developed a philosophy of dialogue and communion in which the distinction between the relation of an 'I' to a 'Thou' and an 'I' to an 'It' or 'Him' plays a central part.

Marcel was influenced by the phenomenology of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl and by his rejection of idealism and Cartesianism, especially early in his career.⁴ His basic philosophical orientation was motivated by his dissatisfaction with the approach to philosophy that is found in Rene Descartes and the development of Cartesianism after Descartes. Marcel observed that "Cartesianism implies a severance ... between intellect and life; its result is the depreciation of the one, and an exaltation of the other, both arbitrary."⁵ Descartes is famous for having purposefully doubted all of his ideas and for splitting the interior self, off from the external world. According to Marcel, Descartes's starting point is not an accurate depiction of the self in experience, in which there is no division between consciousness and the world as Descartes tries to prove. Describing Descartes's approach as a 'spectator' view, Marcel argued that the self should instead be understood as a 'participant' in reality by being immersed in the world of concrete experience.

The Ethic of Interrelations in Gabriel Marcel's Philosophy

Marcel emphasizes two general ways of comporting ourselves towards others that can be used as a measure for human relations; they are *disponibilité* and *indisponibilité*. These words- generally translated as either “availability” and “unavailability” or, less frequently, as “disposability” and “non-disposability”- bear meanings for Marcel that do not fully apply synonymously in the English language. Therefore, in addition to the sense of availability and unavailability, Marcel suggests the addition of the concepts of “handiness” and “unhandiness” to his English readers in an attempt to clarify his meaning. Handiness and unhandiness refer to the availability of one's “resources”- material, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual to another. Thus, the term *disponibilité* refers to the measure in which I am available to someone, the state of having my resources at hand to offer; and this availability or unavailability of resources is a general state or disposition. While it may appear that there is the possibility of a selfish allocation of one's resources, the truth is that when resources are not available, their inaccessibility affects both the other and the self. Marcel comments frequently on the interconnected nature of the treatment of others and the state of the self.

Indisponibilité (*unavailability*) can manifest itself in any number of ways; however, “unavailability is invariably rooted in some measure of alienation.”⁶ Pride is an instructive example of *indisponibilité*, although the same state of non-disposability would also exist in a person who has come to view herself in functional terms, or one who is blinded by a purely technical worldview. Pride is not an exaggerated opinion of oneself arising from self-love, which Marcel insists is really only vanity; rather, pride consists in believing that one is self-sufficient.⁷ It consists in drawing one's strength solely from oneself. Marcel notes: “The proud man is cut off from a certain kind of communion with his fellowmen, which pride, acting as a principle of destruction tends to break down. Indeed, this destructiveness can be *equally* well directed against the self; pride is in no way incompatible with self-hate...”⁸ For the person who is *indisponible*, other people are reduced to “examples” or “cases” of genus “other person” rather than being encountered *qua* other as unique individuals. Instead of

encountering the other person as a 'Thou', the other is encountered as a 'He' or 'She', or even as an 'It'. Marcel explains:

If I treat a 'Thou' as a 'He', I reduce the other to being only nature; an animated object which works in some ways and not in others. If, on the contrary, I treat the other as 'Thou', I treat him and apprehend him *qua* freedom. I apprehend him *qua* freedom because he is also freedom and not only nature. When I treat the other person as a He or She, it is because he or she is kept at arm's length but within my grasp, outside of the circle that I form with myself in my *cogito* but inside the circle of "my world".⁹

In contrast, "the characteristic of the soul which is present and at the disposal of others is that it cannot think in terms of *cases*; in its eyes, there are *no cases at all*."¹⁰ The disponible person, who is available or disposable to others, has an entirely different experience of her place in the world: she acknowledges her interdependence with other people. Relationships of *disponibilité* are characterized by presence and communication between persons *qua* other, *qua* freedom- a communication and communion between persons who transcend their separation without merging into a unity, that is, while remaining separate to some degree. Marcel submits: "It should be obvious at once that a being of this sort is not an autonomous whole, is not in [the] expressive English phrase, self-contained; on the contrary, such a being is open and exposed, as unlike as can be to a compact impenetrable mass."¹¹ To be *disponible* to the other is to be present to and for her, to put one's resources at her disposal, and to be open and permeable to her. *Disponibilité* is therefore the character of a balanced human relationship founded on a subject-subject (I – Thou) relations. *Indisponibilité*, on the other hand, is the character of an unbalanced, denigrative, and exploitative human relationship founded on a subject-object (I – It) relations.

Freedom and Participation: Foundation of Ideal Interrelations

A strange inner change is spreading throughout humanity, according to Marcel. As odd as it first seems, this change is evoked by the awareness that members of humanity are contingent on

conditions that make up the framework for their very existence. Man recognizes that at root, he is an existing thing, but he somehow feels compelled to prove his life is more significant than that. He begins to believe that the things he surrounds himself with can make his life more meaningful or valuable.¹² This belief, says Marcel, has thrown a man into a ghostly state of quandary caused by a desire to *possess* rather than to *be* (Hernandez, 2019). All people become a master of defining their selves by either their possessions or by their professions. Meaning is forced into life through these venues. Even more, individuals begin to believe that their lives have worth because they are tied to these things, these objects. This devolution creates a situation in which individuals experience the self only as a statement, as an object, “I am *x*.”¹³ The objectification of the self through one’s possessions robs one of her freedom and separates her from the experiences of her participation in being. The idolatrous world of perverted possession must, therefore, be abandoned if the true reality of humanity is to be reached.¹⁴

Marcel gave to existentialism a view of freedom that marries the absolute indeterminacy of traditional existentialism with the view that transcendence out of facticity can only come by depending upon others with the same goals. The result is a type of freedom-by-degrees in which all people are free, since to be free is to be self-governing, but not all people experience the freedom that can lead them out of objectification. This is so because the experience of freedom cannot be achieved unless the subject extricates herself from the grip of egocentrism since freedom is not simply doing what desire dictates. The person who sees herself as autonomous within herself has freedom based on ill-fated egocentrism. She errs in believing freedom to be rooted in independence.

Freedom is defined by Marcel in both a negative and positive sense. Negatively, freedom is, “The absence of whatever resembles an alienation from oneself,” and positively it is when “The motives of my action are within the limits of what I can legitimately consider as the structural traits of my self.”¹⁵ Freedom, then, is always about the possibilities of the self, understood within the confines of relationships with others. As an

existentialist, Marcel's freedom is tied to the raw experiences of the body. However, the phenomenology of Marcelian freedom is characterized by his insistence that freedom is something to be experienced, and the self is fully free when it is submerged in the possibilities of the self and the needs of others.¹⁶ Although all humans have basic, autonomous freedom (Marcel thought of this as "capricious" freedom), in virtue of their embodiment and consciousness; only those persons who seek to experience being by freely engaging with other free beings can break out of the facticity of the body and into the fulfillment of being.

At first glance, Marcelian freedom is paradoxical: the more one enters into a self-centered project, the less legitimate it is to say that the act is free, whereas the more the self is engaged with other free individuals; the more the self is free. However, the phenomenological experience of freedom is less paradoxical when it is seen through the lens of the engagement of freedom. Ontologically, we rarely have experiences of the singular self; instead, our experiences are bound to those with whom we interact. Freedom based on the very participation that the free act seeks to affirm is the ground of the true experience of freedom towards which Marcel gravitates.

What Marcel's viewpoint on freedom and participation suggests is that when we are able to act freely, we can move away from the isolated perspective of the problematic man ("I am body only,") to that of the participative subject ("I am a being among beings") who is capable of interacting with others in the world. Marcelian participation is possible through a special type of reflection in which the subject views herself as a being among beings, rather than as an object. This reflection is a *secondary reflection* and is distinguished from both primary reflection and mere contemplation. *Primary reflection* explains the relationship of an individual to the world based on her existence as an object in the world, whereas secondary reflection takes as its point of departure the being of the individual among others. The goal of primary reflection, then, is to problematize the self and its relation to the world, and so it seeks to reduce and conquer particular things. Marcel rejects primary reflection as applicable to ontological matters because he believes it cannot understand the main metaphysical issue involved in existence: the incommunicable

experience of the body as mine. Neither does mere contemplation suffice to explain this phenomenon. Contemplation is existentially significant, because it indicates the act by which the self concentrates its attention on its self, but such an act without secondary reflection would result in the same egocentrism that Marcel attempts to avoid through his work.

Secondary reflection has as its goal the explication of existence, which cannot be separated from the individual, who is in turn situated among others. For Marcel, an understanding of one's being is only possible through secondary reflection, since it is a reflection whereby the self asks itself how and from what starting point the self is able to proceed.¹⁷ The existential impetus of secondary reflection cannot be overemphasized for Marcel; he stresses "Participation which involves the presence of the self to the world is only possible if the temptation to assume the self is wholly distinct from the world is overcome."¹⁸ This is made possible only through secondary reflection. The existential upshot is that secondary reflection allows the individual to seek out others, and it dissolves the dualism of primary reflection by realizing the lived body's relation to the ego. Secondary reflection is therefore the I – Thou mentality; the primary human mental predisposition needed to indulge in mutually beneficial subject-subject relations. On the other hand, Primary reflection predisposes one for an I – It relations.

***Osu* Caste System: An Overview**

Diverse oral traditions on the origins of the *Osu* caste system abound. As with most ancient practices of African root, there is a dearth of credible substantial written tradition on the history of *Osu* practice. However, the available documented information (based on oral traditions) demonstrates that the *Osu* Caste System is a product of the indigenous religious practices of the Igbo.¹⁹ The indigenous religion is interwoven with Igbo cultural practices, and it is difficult for foreigners to fully understand and appreciate the good part of the indigenous culture. The indigenous Igbo regards himself as a meeting point of Mother Earth or "Ala", which contains all physical creation and the ancestral spirit that is functionally linked to his ancestors.

The Supreme Spirit “Chi-Ukwu” or “Chukwu” is the force of creation and the custodian of infinite power over everything. The Igbo man relates to this infinitely powerful God-image through the deities that are ultimately linked to one’s “chi” or spiritual force. Deities are derived out of objects of creation such as ‘geophysical landmarks’ like seas, lakes, rivers, streams, caves, hills, and mountains, spirits such as warrior-kings, and legendary spiritual leaders. Those geophysical landmarks are regarded as the homes of the gods and the ancestral spirits.²⁰ The gods are perceived as the connection between the people and their life. And the belief was that these gods could be manipulated in order to protect them and serve their interests.²¹

A shrine (sacred place of worship and sacrifice) is preserved by every Igbo community (and sometimes even individuals) where the family’s ancestral spirits resided and communed with the living. There were (are still) village and town deities, which became more powerful because of their reputation or notoriety. This category of deities is almost like institutions unto themselves. The deities were (and some are still) attended to by highly respected priests and assistants, who were (are) engaged in serving the spiritual needs of visitors who could come from near and distant locations to commune at the famous shrines.

Oral testimonies suggest that some six centuries ago, the growth in several powerful deities created the need for many assistants to occupy the position of the high priests of major shrines. Little places of rest and prayers (monasteries perhaps) were established in the vicinity of major shrines to train and maintain a constant supply of high-priest assistants. These priests were highly regarded and revered among the people because they were seen as the eyes and mouthpieces of the gods. These priests became the physical link between the living, the people, and their god. However, as time passed, age-aged, culture infiltrated and religion banalised, the priests upon mastering their spiritual functions (of learning to serve the gods) were unjustly and erroneously assigned the Igbo pejorative name of *Osu*, *Ume*, or *Ohu arusi* (the slave of the deities/gods or shrines).²² This was how the dehumanizing practice of *Osu* emerged. Evidence suggests that the ‘*Osus*’ were originally regarded with “respect and honour” apparently because they belonged to the gods.²³ This show of

respect for those who attended to the shrines, unfortunately, transformed into social ostracism.²⁴ Then, the ‘Osus’ were not many. In the nineteenth century, “their numbers expanded and their status deteriorated dramatically, so that they became outcasts, feared and despised” or even abhorred.²⁵

The *Osus* and their descendants belonged to the gods, and they become the properties of the shrines. They resided in the vicinity of the shrines of major deities and for all practical purposes excluded themselves from routine engagements with the rest of the community. So, as the agents of the gods or deities, *Osus* were forced to maintain a distanced relationship with the rest of the civil society. The early *Osu* ranks were “non-celibate” and thus had families, and the offspring inherited their status.²⁶ They were seen as a privileged class; one people admired and sought to emulate. The ‘Osus’ fulfilled their lives in the communities by serving the deities. In return, they obtained a reasonable livelihood from proceeds of offerings that pour steadily into the premises of the deities that they served.

All these changed later. Igbo communities began to maintain a set of rules that regulated their interactions with the *Osus*, mostly out of fear (and/or respect) for the powerful deities under which they thrived and performed their religious functions. These fear or reverence later depreciated to abhorrence and denigration. For instance, intimate social interaction, including marriage, was forbidden between *Osus* and the *Diala* (note that the term *Diala* points to others (freeborn) who live in the community that are not *Osu*; that is the ordinary members who are not dedicated to any god or shrine). In some communities, it is forbidden for the *Diala* to spill the blood of *Osu* (even in hostile situations). Some communities go as far as forbidding the *Diala* from eating meat that was butchered or prepared by an *Osu*. The list of items that mounted a social divide between the *Osus* and the *Diala* grew larger with time; though varying from place to place depending on the distinguishing cultural norms of particular Igbo communities.

Anyone that goes contrary to the laws regulating their interaction with the *Osu* automatically becomes an *Osu*. Even though the offenders may not physically relocate to cohabit with the ‘Osus’, they were (are) regarded and treated like an *Osu* by the rest of the community.²⁷ Therefore, like racism, *Osuism*²⁸ distorts

and impedes normal interpersonal relationships between the *Diala* and *Osu* in Igbo land. The *Osus* were forbidden to be combatants in warfare for fear of spilling their blood, which could unleash the wrath of the deities.²⁹ Some defenseless small communities were often compelled to seek refuge in the premises of nearby shrines to avert impending doom when under sudden attack from superior invading forces. Once the deity's high priest acknowledged and granted them protection from attack and harm to the refugees, they were automatically assumed the *Osu* status. In some circumstances, prisoners captured during inter-communal wars were sold off, and their new owners could elect to enlist some of them to *Osu* status by giving them away as gestures of and placation to a local deity.³⁰ Thus, the population of the *Osu* increased.

No matter how the *Osu Caste System* originated in the Igbo land, and no matter its apparent past benefits, it is now the feeling of many right-thinking individuals that the ancient institution, which is internal apartheid in Igbo land, has outlived its usefulness. To redeem the 'Osus' and Igbo society, one should revisit the past to explain the rationale behind the once vibrant *Osu Caste* culture. The *Osu Caste System* remains a sad reminder of the historical past of the Igbo nation that has refused to evaporate over time. The only way to put those sad memories to rest is to find ways and means to terminate the discriminatory practices associated with 'osuisim' today. With the cooperation of everyone in the Igbo nation, this task can be accomplished. Marcel's ethic of interrelations provides the ideology needed to eradicate this unwholesome practice.

Osu Caste System and Interrelations in Igbo Land

The *Osu Caste System* is an age-long practice that precludes the dignity of the human person because it forces some persons to feel less human before others. From the standpoint of Gabriel Marcel's notion of interrelations, how do we classify this practice and how can the practice be tamed? Marcel's philosophy provides us with an insightful understanding of the human relationship. A rigorous attempt is made in the following section to understand the practice of the *Osu Caste system* in the language of Marcel's philosophy.

Marcel's Ethics of Interrelations and *Osu* Caste System

Marcel's philosophy of intersubjectivity emphasizes the need for parties relating with each other to find their relationship on a subject-subject basis based on the principle of mutual beneficence. In this sense, the parties see each other as equals- as subjects. Each works for the furtherance of the other's interests. All forms of exploitative tendencies and all attempts to dehumanize the other are eschewed. Here each person sees the other as a subject- an 'I'. This is why Marcel describes this relation as subject-subject relations or an I – Thou relations. This form of relations is conceptually and practically opposed to the subject-object relations- I – It, which is exploitative and dehumanizing.

Marcel's thesis, like Martin Buber's, is that human existence is defined by how we engage in dialogue with each other, with the world, and with God. Marcel conceptualized his dialogical philosophy in such wise that the "self" is understood in terms of relationships instead of what he called the "Severed I". He proposes two attitudinal relationships for the 'I': the *I-Thou* and the *I-it*. These form the basis for his anthropological dualism and authentic existence. The *I-Thou* relationship relates to a deep and mysterious personal engagement with the other, the other being the *Thou*. It is a relationship with other persons in the world that is founded on deep or genuine human encounters, mutuality, and reciprocal love. In this manner of relationship, the persons involved- the 'I' and the 'Thou,' see and treat themselves as equals. This, therefore, is a subject-subject relations; a balanced relationship that is not exploitative.

It becomes very obvious that the *Osu* Caste System falls under what Gabriel Marcel describes as an I-It relationship. This is because the practice is discriminative and denigrative. The practice reduces or considers the 'Diala' as the only true 'I' or 'Thou' in the society while all the *Osus* are categorized as 'Its'. That is, in the language of Marcel, the *Osus* are considered as less humans; hence, they are forbidden from engaging in human routine activities. They are secluded from the others in the society and not permitted to mix and marry the 'Dialas'. Gabriel Marcel would frown at the practice of *Osu* Caste system because it is exploitative. The 'Dialas' use the 'Osus' as means to their ends. They go to the *Osu* when they are in trouble, in need of prayers or other material comforts.

They see it as a right to be served and even saved by the 'Osu'. However, when the *Osu* is in need, he is abandoned or even left to die unaided in the forest. The *Osu* practice is a pure case of an I-It relation in present-day Igbo societies in Africa.

Considering Marcel's extensive treatment of the I-Thou relation in contradistinction with the I-It, it is pertinent to state that the *Osu* practice deteriorated into the abhorrence we have today because the 'Dialas' began to detach their 'I' from the 'I' of the 'Osu'. The 'Diala', at a point in the Igbo history, began to magnify his 'I' to the extent that the 'I' of the *Osu* suddenly seemed comparable to the 'It' of the ordinary object in the environment. Consequently, the *Osu* lost his humanity, and the bestiality or inanimacy of an animal or object was attributed to him. This is why or even how *Osu* that was once envied and revered among the Igbo in ancient times became the abhorrent social class today. Nothing significantly changed about the function of the *Osu* or about how they lived their lives. What changed is social perception due to the influx of foreign culture and religion. The *Osu* personality was reduced from an 'I', a 'Thou' to a mere 'It'; from a Subject to an Object; not because they stopped being human or became dangerous to others but because others felt, at some point, that they shouldn't be considered as humans on the same level as they are.

The Absolute Thou (God): Marcelian Solution to *Osu* Denigration among Igbo

How can the I-It tendency or relation be subdued? How can the denigration associated with the *Osu* Caste System be conquered? What is the solution to exploitation in human relationships? Gabriel Marcel considers the introduction of God into the human relationship as the answer to the above questions. He describes God as the Absolute Thou, the True Thou while men are the temporal 'I' or 'Thous'. Marcel thinks that relationships become exploitative when one or both parties lose sight of God.

Marcel's uniqueness stems from his attitude to the meaning of life. His whole philosophy can be summed up as the expression of an option: that life can have a positive meaning. This can be appreciated, he asserts, if life is seen in a theocentric perspective which is itself possible only when the 'sacral' character of life is

recognized. Marcel suggests that this recognition leads to the awareness by the man of his situation as a being participating in the overall “Mystery of Being”. The basis of his existential metaphysics is an ontology of participation on three interconnected levels; sensation (the self), communion (others), and transcendence (union with God). While he insists on the individual’s freedom to accept or reject this option, Marcel’s concrete philosophy of existence is revealed as an ‘applied theocentric. This theocentric orientation is at the heart of his concrete approaches to the mystery of being- fidelity, love, and hope- which, because they are directed towards and grounded in God, are shown to be philosophical translations of the three ‘theological virtues- faith, hope, and charity. According to Marcel’s dialectic, man’s consideration of self leads to the awareness of his ontological status as a creature that is dependent on God, his creator. In his relation with others, the individual is led to acknowledge that the ground and guarantee of all authentic *I-Thou* relationships is God as the Absolute *Thou*.

Marcel argues that the most fundamental and mysterious form of relationship is with the Absolute Thou- God. Martin Buber is in total agreement with Marcel on this. He notes: “God . . . him who – whatever else He may be – enters into a direct relation with us men in creative, revealing and redeeming acts, . . . thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relation with him.”³¹ Integral to both the Jewish and Christian traditions is the premise that whenever you have a dialogue with another human being you are at the same time engaging with God (Mk. 12: 29-31). Islam and other world religions teach the same essentially. Even the pristine Igbo religion and culture teach the same. Accordingly, Buber, echoing Marcelian sentiments, concludes that “the relation to a human being is the proper metaphor for the relation to God.”³² Here we see the religious-existential character of both Marcel and Buber’s work in that they view God, not in abstract ontological terms, but the concreteness of man’s encounter with his fellow man.

The human, earthly *Thou* is a limited, temporal *Thou* that is never fully a *Thou* ‘for always’; it is never a full presence, but is limited by space and time and by the realm of *It* (threatened even by objectification, alienation into the world of *It*). The Absolute *Thou*, the *Thou* that is always *Thou* without being limited by the *It*

in space and time, is the eternal *Thou*, the *Thou* that never becomes an *It*. Only God is this unlimited, eternal *Thou*. What is the issue at stake in Marcel's thesis on God as the Absolute *Thou*? It is the clear, simple, and radical idea that in relating to (in meeting) the temporal *Thou* (our fellow humans) there is a glancing through to (a meeting with) something even more profound, to the Eternal *Thou* (God); that there is something of the fullness of the Absolute *Thou* in relating to our fellow human, temporal *Thou*. In each sphere of relational life, the human being is able to hear, to perceive (*vernehmen*) a 'breath' (*ein Wehen*) of the full, Absolute *Thou*; the human being can reach and realize the very source of living, the *Thou* as the 'cradle of the Real Life'.³³ Simply, for Gabriel Marcel as well as Martin Buber, the human being's relation with the divine, with the eternal *Thou* (with God), is closely connected with (or takes place via) the relation of the human being with other human beings, with other finite *Thous*.

We can deduce from the above exposition that the most genuine way to tackle the denigrative tendencies associated with the practice of *Osu* is to reintroduce God to human relations. Fortunately, Christianity and most religions teach the same: love of neighbour is the love of God. Marcel is emphatic in stating that God, the Absolute *Thou*, is the foundation of authentic human relationships. All balanced human relationships are inspired by the love of God. For the 'I' to always view the 'Thou' as an 'I' equal to his 'I' in any instance of human relationship, the 'I' must always equate his love for the 'Thou' to the love he has for himself and more importantly, to the love he has for God. In this way, the 'I' will always excuse the failings of the 'Thou' and love him unconditionally since his love for him is the love for God.

In the Igbo community, this unique understanding of human relationships founded on reciprocal love, love of God, will help annihilate the injustices done to the 'Osus' by the 'Dialas'. The Igbo are very religious people; be it the belief in the Christian God or any deity, the Igbo have always held a high sense of the sacred. Following the ethic of interrelations postulated by Gabriel Marcel, the Igbo must allow their religiosity to permeate their social life. In this way, the bastardization of the *Osu* social status will be eschewed. The 'Osus' will begin to be seen as equals with others since they are also created by the same god or God that created the

‘Dialas’. The ‘Dialas’ will then be able to love and relate with the ‘Osus’ as equals since doing so is piety- the love of neighbour is the love of God.

Conclusion

The human person is not a mere thing- an object thrown into the universe as Heidegger would make us understand. Man is an intellectual being, a being capable of rationalizing basically because he, unlike other animals, is gifted with a body and an immortal soul- the element that bears and communicates the *intellectus*. It is based on this innate and immutable quality of man that the principle of human dignity is established. The principle of human dignity as the agreed guiding principle in determining the duty to protect human life is anchored on the universal law promoted by the United Nations (UN), and the development of fundamental human rights is based on it. The principle is upheld and enforced by and in every nation. This principle formulates a direct and unconditional right to the protection granted to humans first and foremost because of their ability to set for themselves goals and purposes and autonomously to determine their actions. Thus, this right covers the ability itself and everything required to exercise it. The freedom to develop one's personality autonomously is therefore included in this right as is the physical inviolability of human beings and the natural, economic, and social foundations of their existence. Hence, an attack on the dignity of a human person is a threat to the life- to the continuous existence of that particular individual; such is also a threat to the collective dignity of mankind. This is because human dignity ensues from the same source- the soul's existence.

Osu Caste System is a direct attack and disparagement of human dignity. Anyone who encourages it is not just an enemy of the *Osu* alone, he is an enemy of mankind, an enemy to himself. This practice must be abhorred. No individual should be exposed to such loathsomeness for whatever reason whatsoever. Marcel's philosophy provides the Igbo with an existential paradigm to help re-establish the right order of human relations that must exist between the *Osu* and the *Diala* (freeborn) within Igbo communities. We are all equals, Marcel reminds us, and we must therefore find practical ways to live as equals. There is no need to

relate and treat a fellow human being, one who bears the same ontological worth as you, as a mere animal- an ordinary thing out there. The relationship should be cordial and mutually inclusive and beneficial to all involved. That's what Marcel projects as *disponibilite*.

Beyond Marcel's doctrine, communities, societies and even law-making arms of government across the Igbo nation should consider making laws that abrogate discriminatory practices like *Osu* Caste. Uchenna agrees with this position. He affirms: "I suggest that something drastic has to be done to eradicate this obnoxious system. There is the urgent need for all Igbo leaders of thought, the traditional rulers, the governors, the clergymen, and all the people that matter to come together and enact a law out rightly banning the system generally in Igbo land as there is no basis for its continued existence."³⁴ Such laws should be marched practically with requisite punitive measures that will serve as a deterrent to offenders. It is quite concerning that even within this 21st century people are still subjected to terrible social ills like *osuism*. This is the worst form of racial abuse- abuse of one's ontological essence perpetrated by persons who share the same essence and way of life with you. No denigration can be worse than this. *Osu* Caste has remained in vogue because the traditional institutions are protecting the deplorable practice. For reasons which we may never comprehend, some traditionalists still hold this practice sacred and would do anything to see that it lives on. This is why the *osu* victimization continues. State forces must therefore find ways to intervene and rescue persons passing through this plight. Unless this is done, the darkness cast by *Osu* Caste will linger.

Endnotes

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