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# PRAYER AND METAPHYSICS: A METHOD FOR THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD ACCORDING TO GABRIEL MARCEL<sup>a</sup>

Oración y metafísica: método del conocimiento de Dios según Gabriel Marcel

Research Article

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## Abstract

This research focuses on the question of the possibility of knowing God, conceived as the fullness of being, primarily through prayer, according to the philosophical proposal of Gabriel Marcel. Drawing on the work of the French thinker, the study advances the hypothesis that prayer or invocation is indispensable for such knowledge, insofar as God manifests Himself as an absolute Thou rather than merely as an impersonal cause. In this sense, Marcel holds that the experience of

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the transcendent is not presented solely as a problem for our intellect, but rather as a communion in which one participates through encounter and dialogue—that is, within the relational sphere that makes prayer possible.

The article argues that, from a metaphysical perspective, prayer constitutes a legitimate path of access to being and to the fullness of being, which is the absolute Thou. This entails not only intellectual but also moral demands for the practice of metaphysics. To demonstrate this, three key aspects are examined: the notion of ontological mystery and the demand of being as a call addressed to each individual; the role of intersubjectivity as mediation for accessing the mystery of being; and, finally, Marcel's conception of prayer and its relevance for the metaphysical knowledge of God.

The methodology adopted is bibliographic-documentary in nature, focused on the study of Marcel's works and those of his principal interpreters.

## Keywords

Absolute Thou; Being; Encounter; Gabriel Marcel; Intersubjectivity; Metaphysics; Mystery; Prayer.

## Resumen

Esta investigación se centra en la pregunta por la posibilidad conocer a Dios, concebido como plenitud del ser, principalmente a través de la oración, según la propuesta filosófica de Gabriel Marcel. A partir de la obra del pensador francés, se plantea la hipótesis de que la oración o invocación resulta imprescindible para dicho conocimiento, ya que Dios se manifiesta como un Tú absoluto y no solo como una causa impersonal. En este sentido, Marcel considera que la experiencia de lo trascendente no se presenta únicamente como un problema para nuestra inteligencia, sino como una comunión en la que se participa mediante el encuentro y el diálogo, es decir, dentro del ámbito relational que hace posible la oración. El trabajo sostiene que, desde una perspectiva metafísica, la oración constituye una vía legítima de acceso al ser y a la plenitud del ser, que es el Tú absoluto. Esto implica exigencias no solo intelectuales, sino también morales, para el ejercicio de la metafísica. Para demostrarlo, se analizan tres aspectos clave: la noción de misterio ontológico y la exigencia del ser como llamada en cada individuo; el papel de la intersubjetividad como mediación para acceder al misterio del ser; y, finalmente, la concepción marceliana de la oración y su relevancia en el conocimiento metafísico de Dios. La metodología adoptada es de carácter bibliográfico-documental, centrada en el estudio de las obras de Marcel y sus principales intérpretes.

## Palabras clave

Encuentro; Gabriel Marcel; Intersubjetividad; Metafísica; Misterio; Oración; Ser; Tú absoluto.

## Introduction

Even prior to his conversion to Catholicism, Marcel (1927/1956a) showed an interest in investigating the metaphysical and anthropological foundations of an act such as prayer (p. 221). This interest, of course, is later deepened throughout his entire body of work, where the notion of invocation acquires great importance insofar as it allows him to extend his reflection on intersubjectivity as a pathway of access to the ontological mystery (Marcel, 1955/1956b, p. 61; 1940/1959, p. 49; 2002, p. 111; 1934/2003, p. 32). In this sense, Marcel may be regarded as one of the initiators of a line of thought that, throughout the twentieth century, was followed by several philosophers concerned with the metaphysical implications of encounter and personal relationships (Buber, 1923/2023; Florenski, 1914/2010; Guardini, 1967/2014; Levinas, 1961/2016; Nédoncelle, 1942/1996; Ricoeur, 1990/1996; Rosenzweig, 1921/1997).

However, one of Marcel's most original contributions to this topic lies in his exploration of the possibility—thanks to his conception of intersubjective relation—of not thinking separately about the God of faith and the God of the philosophers, as Pascal had already proposed centuries earlier (1670/2012, p. 406). Indirectly, Marcel offers an affirmative response to one of the most pressing dilemmas of his time: the possibility of a Christian philosophy, that is, the possibility of rationally inquiring into the mystery of faith without compromising either the autonomy or the critical spirit of philosophical inquiry (Gilson, 1932/2009, pp. 22–25; Heidegger, 1953/2001, pp. 5–6).

This research is oriented around the question of whether knowledge of God, understood as the fullness of Being, can be attained primarily through prayer, according to Gabriel Marcel's proposal. Accordingly, we seek to examine the consequences that the inclusion of prayer in the knowledge of God would have for the practice of metaphysics, insofar as metaphysics is the discipline that studies Being *qua* Being.

The hypothesis guiding our work maintains that, throughout Marcel's entire oeuvre, prayer or invocation is indispensable for the knowledge of God, insofar as the philosopher conceives divinity as revealing itself more as

an absolute *Thou* than as a first cause. This absolute *Thou*, which is both the fullness of Being and a personal Being, constitutes more properly a mystery in which we participate than a problem that we resolve in an impersonal manner. Consequently, such an interpellating divinity can be known only from within encounter and ongoing dialogue—that is, by participating in everything that prayer entails. The results of this research may open a novel path for metaphysical knowledge without dismissing traditional methods, while at the same time allowing for an inquiry into certain moral dispositions and conditions necessary for access to the notions proper to first philosophy.

In order to address the question posed and to verify the viability of the hypothesis, the article is divided into three chapters, corresponding to the specific objectives of the study. First, Marcel's conception of ontological mystery and of Being as a demand that presents itself as a call addressed to the intimacy of the subject's consciousness is developed. Second, we explore the importance of the most significant experiences of intersubjectivity for approaching and understanding the mystery of Being. Finally, we present the French thinker's conception of prayer and argue for its relevance both to metaphysics and to the knowledge of God.

The methodology adopted for this study is based on bibliographic and documentary analysis, centered on the examination of Gabriel Marcel's philosophical works, as well as on the interpretations and commentaries of his principal scholars. This methodological choice responds to the central purpose of the research: rather than collecting empirical data, the aim is to achieve a critical understanding of how the author incorporates prayer into his thought in order to address fundamental questions of metaphysics. From this perspective, bibliographic analysis proves especially pertinent, as it enables the construction of a coherent theoretical framework and the exploration of specialized literature, while also allowing for the confrontation of different philosophical positions and the identification of contradictions, gaps, or lines of convergence.

## Being as a Call

One way of approaching Gabriel Marcel's thought is by distinguishing between confronting a problem and opening oneself to a mystery. We are faced with a problem when the object we think about and wish to know is placed before us as something independent of and external to our existence and history. That which has captured our attention and intelligence becomes the object of a depersonalized judgment that, precisely for this reason, may aspire to a universality valid for every kind of person, context, and time. The personal singularity of the inquirer is irrelevant for approaching an object that can be examined without vital commitments, for the particular *I* does not matter to the object, and the object does not matter to that same *I* who questions and seeks to know (Marcel, 1940/1959, p. 31). The investigating subject could, in fact, be replaced by any other.

The object proper to a problem presents itself to the eyes of knowledge as a spectacle viewed from a distance and, precisely because it is separated from and uncommitted to existence, it readily lends itself to measurement, manipulation, and control (Marcel, 2002, p. 110). According to Marcel, science analyzes the world as a problem, and much of philosophy has likewise attempted to resolve its questions as though they were problematic objects.

When our thinking approaches mystery, by contrast, it cannot remain a mere spectator: "*Je ne suis pas au spectacle* [I am not at the spectacle]" (Marcel, 1968, p. 23). Mystery is not an external object; rather, it "envelops" the questioning subject, because it is part of that subject's existence, origin, and ultimate demand (Marcel, 1933/1987, p. 37). Rather than standing before mystery, thought—and the human being as a whole—finds itself *within* it. In the question that arises when we approach mystery, we do not merely interrogate something external; inevitably, we also place ourselves in question. Within mystery, the distinction between what is *in me* and what stands *before me* becomes blurred and loses its importance.

The answer to which we gain access through questioning, even if only partial, does not yield an abstract result—that is, it is not separable from the individual's life itself. Approaches to mystery, and the truths that mature in the reflective process, do not occur without profoundly transforming the life and self-understanding of the one who questions and seeks. Knowledge of Being and self-knowledge are reciprocal achievements (López Cambronero et al., 2006, p. 109; López Luengos, 2012, p. 133). Whereas a problematic object is separable from the subject, in the case of mystery we participate in it; our approach to it cannot be distinguished from our own destiny (Marcel, 1934/2003, p. 93). Truth, then, is an event of new life for the individual, not merely an intellectual success.

At this point, following some of Marcel's interpreters, it is possible to ask whether the systematic character of problem-oriented thinking is always incompatible with reflection that is open to mystery (Gallagher, 1966/1968, pp. 249, 257–259; Grassi, 2009, pp. 26–27). In fact, this approach to ontological mystery may at times require the unity and systematicity of problem-oriented thinking in order to achieve an ordered access to Being, which, although not systematizable, nonetheless demands rigorous intelligibility so as to avoid confusion or incomplete arguments. One may therefore ask whether Marcel has drawn too sharp a separation between two modes of thinking that might function better if distinguished, yet held in communion.

Now, when Marcel speaks of mystery, he refers to the mystery of Being, which is not properly definable, but which should not for that reason be understood as opaque to intelligence (Moeller, 1953/1960, p. 256). As Poma (2005) argues, although thinking and speaking about Being may seem inadequate, this conscious and evident inadequacy appears to be the most appropriate language for speaking of it (p. 492). Mystery is not synonymous with the unknowable (Marcel, 2002, p. 191). Indeed, the Being of which Marcel speaks is the source of all intelligence and its primary concern.

In this respect, mystery in Marcel's philosophy is clearly distinct from the irrationality characteristic of Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (1917/2005, p. 22). Although it cannot be grasped once and for all within the

limits of a definition, through “concrete approaches”—never completed—we can gradually enter into this fundamental reality and move around it. The mystery of Being becomes increasingly expressible to the extent that we participate more fully in it through certain primordial human experiences. Rather than our affirming something about Being, it is Being that affirms itself within us; it discloses itself in lived reality itself.

Being is not the object of an aseptic and impersonal verification, but of an existential recognition that must never be regarded as finished. Rather than providing evidence of Being, we can bear witness to it (Marcel, 1940/1959, p. 85; 2002, p. 301). For this reason, Being is not the exclusive object of specialists, but a fundamental concern of humble spirits attentive to the origin and purpose of their existence—and, in addition to humility, perseverant and daring enough to recommence these approaches to ontological mystery again and again (Marcel, 1997, p. 34). Before Being, we are always on the way—pilgrims or wayfarers—attentive to receiving its light, yet never fully attaining the source of that light (Gallagher, 1966/1968, p. 35; Marcel, 1968/1971a, p. 34; López Luengos, 2012, p. 56).

Although Marcel avoids defining Being and prudently contents himself with moving in concentric circles around the mystery, carefully approaching it, it may nevertheless be affirmed that, for the French philosopher, Being constitutes the eternal foundation of each person's existential situation. In a sense reminiscent of Augustine of Hippo, Marcel maintains that this inexhaustible reality, which exceeds the subject, is at the same time what is most intimate and closest to us (Grassi, 2024, p. 43). Being is the fullness not only of reality, but also the fullness to which the individual aspires. This fullness is never completely given; therefore, from within our own intimacy, we tend toward it as our most personal demand. From the precarious being that we are and in which we participate, we seek, through an ascending dynamism, to advance toward an ontological completeness that remains unknown to us (Marcel, 1968/1971a, p. 88).

Nevertheless, this demand for the fullness of Being is not an arbitrary desire or a circumstantial aspiration; rather, it is an impulse akin to a call (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, p. 177; Marcel, 2002, p. 228). Indeed, the mysterious character

of Being lies in the fact that we do not approach it as an inert metaphysical foundation, but as a living and loving source of all that exists. For this reason, the philosopher can affirm that the ontological mystery is not objective, although it does not follow from this that it is therefore subjective. Rather, Marcel indicates that the Being of which we speak is a reality that becomes clear and experientially accessible insofar as it is lived from within intersubjectivity.

This means that Being manifests itself primarily as a presence, and not merely as something given; rather, as a *thou* with whom we coexist and engage in dialogue—that is, with whom we share a common history. The presence of Being, therefore, becomes recognizable not only through arduous intellectual efforts, but above all through invocation (Marcel, 2002, p. 187). A presence can only be invoked or can respond to its call.

The demand of Being of which we have spoken, when seen more clearly, is the intimate relationship of our existence with an original and fundamental *Thou*—a relationship that advances through approximations in search of a fullness that gives meaning to all the vital dimensions of the subject. Like any relationship, it is never fully complete; for this reason, Being must not be substantivized as though it were a presupposition or a secure datum (Marcel, 2002, p. 237). For the same reason, this relationship with the mystery of Being may involve unforeseen developments, advances and setbacks, and may inflame existence with novelty, insofar as its appearing opens new horizons for thought and for the history of the subject who invokes it and responds to its call. Perpetual novelty is thus another characteristic of Being insofar as it is an invoked and interpellating presence (Gallagher, 1966/1968, p. 81; López Luengos, 2012, p. 65; Marcel, 1951/2001, p. 74).

After all that has been said, it may be pointed out that, for Marcel, philosophy has usually been conceived more as a spectator than as a participant in the ontological mystery. Philosophers have understood themselves more as *homo spectans* than as *homo particeps* (Marcel, 1968/1971a, p. 219; 2002, p. 119; 1934/2003, p. 22). However, it is not possible to approach philosophical questions as if they were scientific or technical problems—that is, detached from participation. Philosophy does not merely study theoretical issues; it lives

them. Without taking this “concrete” character as a point of departure, nothing in the history of philosophy can be properly understood (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, p. 110). In other words, there is a certain *co-esse* between metaphysical contemplation and the self, since to contemplate is also to participate (Marcel, 2002, p. 139). The recovery and reconquest of this participation is what the French philosopher calls “secondary reflection” or “reflection in the second degree” (Marcel, 2002, p. 85; 1934/2003, p. 107; 1971/2012, p. 244).

In this sense, Marcel comes to characterize metaphysics as a “logic of freedom,” insofar as it does not involve abstraction alone, but above all a response to a call. Metaphysics is the recognition of a fullness that arises from a response of our freedom. Progress in this response and in this fullness is constant and increasing, such that the practice of the discipline is accompanied not only by truth, but also by joy and creation. Blázquez Carmona (1988) holds that Marcel learned this feature from Bergson: philosophy is not a result, but a continuous creation (p. 90). Secondary reflection, therefore, is an enemy of closed, finished, and definitive concepts.

This means that responding to the perpetual call of mystery generates an event of expansion of the fullness of Being in our existence—an event that Marcel (1934/2003, p. 153) calls “creation,” and which, in turn, gives rise to that vital joy the philosopher identifies with the presence of Being within us (Grassi, 2024, pp. 161, 196). Just as the event-creation of Being fills life, so too does it satisfy life with the joy of responding to the call that constitutes the origin and meaning of our history. Metaphysics, then, is a logic of freedom, but also a logic of the novelty of the event and of joy in its constant advent.

For Marcel, knowledge in the history of science has acquired an eminently problematic, non-participatory, and impersonal character, which has favored a spirit of domination over the world through technology. The absolutization of technology increases the risk of making the sense of Being disappear, by reducing everything to a utilitarian and power-oriented function (Marcel, 1955/1956b, p. 50). The anxious pursuit of ever-greater comfort is all that renders tolerable a life that is no longer regarded as a gift or as a presence (Marcel, 1998a, p. 242; Marcel, 1951/2001, p. 54).

Nevertheless, behind this anxiety for the hyper-technical resolution of all evils lies the abyss of despair: “there is an intimate dialectical correlation between an optimism regarding technical progress and a philosophy of despair that almost inevitably flows from it” (Marcel, 1968/1971a, p. 33). This despair arises from the certainty that, despite all efforts to produce devices, technology offers no way out—nor does it even come close—to the mysteries of evil, loneliness, and death (Marcel, 1934/2003, p. 175; Ramírez Agudelo, 2019, p. 202). For this reason, Marcel (1951/2001) can affirm that the crisis of the contemporary age is, above all, a metaphysical crisis (p. 41).

Despite what the philosopher expresses, we believe that, as Gallagher (1966/1968, p. 257) maintains, the almost totalitarian expansion of functional logic has not only placed the mystery of Being in danger, but has also compelled deeper reflection on the unique and irrepeatable condition of the human being and on human dignity. It is at the most extreme point of the domination of impersonal function that the special relationship of dialogue and nourishment between human existence and the mystery of Being may be revealed most clearly and luminously—for all, and certainly for philosophy: the unceasing discovery of the richness of subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

## Metaphysics Is the Neighbor

Like other twentieth-century philosophers, Marcel emphasizes the importance of intersubjectivity for the constitution of the human person. These reflections arose in him from certain personal experiences that marked his entire vital and speculative trajectory: the death of his mother when he was still a child, his work with the families of French soldiers during the Great War, his experiences with the paranormal, and his vocation as a playwright, among others (Grassi, 2016, p. 157).

Human life lacks meaning without the other, for it does not even come to be formed as such except within the framework of a relationship with a *thou*. The success and fullness of an individual are inseparable from the success and

fullness of the communion of which that individual is a part (Marcel, 1934/2003, p. 97; 1945/2005, p. 167). Egoism, rather than being a moral failure, is a lack of clarity regarding what the subject truly is; by closing in on oneself, one betrays oneself, since we only come to understand and value ourselves through the understanding and valuation of others: "I confer value upon myself insofar as I know myself to be loved by those other beings whom I love" (Marcel, 2002, p. 204).

The subject encounters his or her individuality not when withdrawing into the contemplation of personal gifts, but precisely when offering those gifts to others (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, p. 151; Gallagher, 1966/1968, pp. 32–33, 128; Marcel, 1971/2012, p. 220). What is given in charity is not an already-possessed *I*; rather, that *I* is acquired in the very act of giving it: "I am, without doubt, less immediately present to myself than to the one to whom I have given my faith" (Marcel, 1945/2005, p. 144). In this sense, love is an act of *decentering*, of gaining life by losing it (Marcel, 1940/1959, p. 255; 2002, p. 186). For this reason, Marcel conceives love as a renewal and a rebirth of the habitual course of life (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, p. 155; Marcel, 1971/2012, p. 68).

Although Marcel (1980/1989) highlights in Heidegger the relationship established between Being and the sacred, he considers that the German philosopher fails to recognize the importance of intersubjectivity for Being and the sacred to attain their authentic meaning (p. 363). For the French thinker, intersubjectivity is not only of anthropological significance, but also entails an openness to the ontological mystery. Encounter—an experience little valued by philosophers until now—entails not only an expansion of personal experience, but also the possibility of an enlargement in access to Being (Marcel, 1933/1987, p. 41; 2002, pp. 131–132). Encounter is the point of departure for the discovery of Being (Marcel, 2002, p. 75). Mystery, as discussed in the previous chapter, is truly understood when we grasp that it is a presence—a *thou* that constantly exhorts the subject toward intimacy: "There is no being for me unless it is a presence" (Marcel, 1933/1987, p. 69). And to keep a presence alive, we must again and again renew our relationship with it. For this reason, it may be

concluded that the intersubjective bond is the condition for anything to be given to me and for what is given to address and challenge me in turn (Marcel, 2002, p. 206).

For these reasons, our understanding of Being is not distant from life in communion; more strongly, the appreciation of Being is equivalent to the richness of encounter and the fraternity of a shared existence. We cannot confront evil and death, insofar as they are mysteries, armed only with good ideas. Our understanding and our logic must be sustained by a life and a thought constituted *with* others (Marcel, 1968/1971a, p. 193; Moeller, 1953/1960, p. 282; Plourde, 2005, p. 594). Marcel understands the background of Being as *communal*; therefore, it is through intersubjective relationships that we gain access to richer and broader spheres of ontological understanding (Kaufmann Salinas, 2013, pp. 82–83). Consequently, approaches to Being are not carried out solely through logic, but also through certain privileged relational acts, such as fidelity, hope, and charity.

Thus, it becomes intelligible that Marcel should describe Being as a place of fidelity, insofar as it is through the testimony of encounter that the ontological mystery becomes experientially accessible to us. If Aristotle identified Being with substance and Descartes made it evident in the *cogito*, Marcel teaches that Being is revealed only in fidelity, in the reasonable certainty of the authorized testimony of another (Grassi, 2024, p. 198; Marcel, 1934/2003, p. 92). Marcel's metaphysics is not a metaphysics of "I am" or "I think," but of "we are" (Marcel, 2002, p. 205).

At this point, it is important to clarify that Marcel does not equate Being with intersubjectivity; rather, he affirms that the experience of Being is possible only through the intersubjective path. To fully understand his position, it must be noted that every being participates analogically in a personal relation that lies at the origin of all being as transcendent reality—what he calls the absolute *Thou* (Fernández, 2006, p. 125; Levinas, 1987/2002, pp. 36–37, 42–43). Being, therefore, is participation in love. Ascent toward original communion—the primary analogate of this participation—is possible only through an immersive

“descent” into fraternity with the neighbor (Grassi, 2024, p. 187; Marcel, 1954/1955, p. 109). This is what has been called the *analogy of presentiality*, or what might also be termed *analogia personae*: participation in presence as it becomes manifest in Being, in persons, and in the world. This means that Being is not a subject, to be sure, but it participates in an intimate bond with the riches of intersubjectivity, which are its origin and inexhaustible source.

It must be acknowledged that Marcel conditions the metaphysical task upon certain ethical dispositions. Access to Being cannot be separated from the willingness to initiate and sustain a relationship of call and response with another—a disposition favorable to receiving a possible grace (Marcel, 1968, p. 24; 1933/1987, p. 72; Pereira-Ríos, 2020, p. 144). From this perspective, the path of morality does not differ from the path of ontology (Grassi, 2016, pp. 13–14; Marcel, 1933/1987, p. 75). Openness to broader fields of Being requires not only sharpness of discernment, but active participation in a fraternal dialogue with the neighbor (Marcel, 1955/1956b, p. 65). At the heart of this morality lies the freedom that arises from having responded to the Being that invokes; and, by having responded, that mysterious presence becomes clearer to understanding. Remaining permeable to the influence of this presence fills existence with novelty, creation, and joy, and distances it from all despair—that is, from a closed and already finished being which, the more it repeats itself, the more it becomes impoverished (Grassi, 2024, p. 122; Marcel, 1933/1987, p. 77; 1934/2003, p. 110).

The origin of Being is intersubjectivity, which explains why, through it, we ascend into the ontological mystery. This foundational ontological communion has not been constituted by fraternity within history; rather, the opposite is the case: it is this transcendent and eternal friendship that makes it possible for fraternal relationships among individuals to be established (Grassi, 2024, p. 177). Marcel is indicating that, at its source, eternal Being is a great city of spirits, a mystical body that we know and in which we participate through the temporal foundations of fidelity and love that we initiate and sustain within our existence. This universal communion depends upon the absolute *Thou*, which is its great orchestrator (Marcel, 2002, pp. 75, 211, 343; 1945/2005, p. 164).

Love not only grants us access to this eternal *co-esse*, but also gives us the certainty that the person toward whom the act of charity is directed likewise participates in this transcendent city. Love for a person cannot be separated from love for a community of persons. What calls us to love a human being is not only that person's individual qualities, but also the dignity of his or her participation in a spiritual civility that exceeds the individual (López Luengos, 2012, p. 75; Tilliette, 2005, p. 515). To love, in this sense, is to consent to and commit oneself to a communion in which one already finds oneself beforehand. We come to be concerned with the ontological mystery insofar as we recognize in it the underlying unity that binds us to other beings: our heart is restless until it rests in the *we* from which everything has emerged (Gallagher, 1966/1968, p. 145; Grassi, 2024, pp. 190–191). Every metaphysical evidence is sustained by a greater or lesser experience of a primordial *we*. For this reason, love is joined to the certainty that to love someone is to say to that person, "you will never die," since no love could have arisen had Being itself not originally rested in a solidary communion that overflows and surpasses time and finitude (Moeller, 1953/1960, p. 187).

Salvation, therefore, is not an individual supraterrestrial success: either many will be saved together as brothers and sisters in a single harmony of wills, or no one will be saved (Marcel, 1940/1959, p. 60; 1934/2003, p. 22). As has been rightly said, love leaves no room for death; but if love is lacking, death absorbs everything (Marcel, 1968/1971a, p. 172; Urabayen, 2001, p. 743). For Marcel (2002), any understanding of God—the absolute *Thou*—cannot be separated from the idea of an intersubjective destiny of beings (p. 322).

## Not Only Speaking About God, but Speaking to God

The origin of Being is the absolute *Thou*, which we cannot conceive except as an interpellation addressed to our innermost self. This interpellation, initially veiled and confused, reveals its origin when it manifests itself as a vocation coming from God Himself (Valderrey, 1976, p. 157). In this sense, Marcel holds

that what philosophy has done in its investigations of divine reality has been to treat a mystery as though it were a problem—that is, to treat a presence as though it were an object: “Je dirai volontiers dogmatiquement que tout rapport d’être à être est personnel, et que le rapport entre Dieu et moi n’est rien s’il n’est pas rapport d’être à être” [“I would willingly say, dogmatically, that every relation of being to being is personal, and that the relation between God and myself is nothing if it is not a relation of being to being”] (Marcel, 1927, p. 137).

Theodicy, in its impersonal study of God as an intellectual object among others, has resulted in a series of attributes said to correspond to the Supreme Being, yet which leave us just as distant from Him as before. For this reason, the philosopher can paradoxically affirm that, when we speak about God, we are not truly speaking of God. Indeed, the God denied by atheism is precisely that divine entity whose characteristics—infinitude, immutability, first causality, among others—do not in any way participate in our vital or historical experience, but instead remain those of a distant and alien object of study (Gallagher, 1966/1968, p. 215; Marcel, 1934/2003, p. 77). According to Marcel (1940/1959), these attributes are not false; however, they acquire meaning and significance only when they are sustained by an active and free thou, whom one invokes and to whom one attends (p. 49). The thou stands in relation to invocation as the object stands in relation to judgment (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, p. 197).

A personal God who presents Himself solely as an object outside space and time—even if He is the supreme object and the foundation of reality—is easy to deny. The absolute Thou can move us only insofar as He is truly a presence (Marcel, 1955/1956b, p. 61). Marcel holds that the insistence on thinking of God as cause—even as first and uncaused cause—tends to reduce the absolute Thou to a naturalistic and impersonal legality, to a truth that brings nothing about in history and with which no genuine commitment is possible.

In a striking formulation, Marcel states that theodicy is already the beginning of atheism. In this sense, the cultural death of God that we witness today—and which has rendered the human being a question without an answer—was already inscribed in the very origins of metaphysics (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, p. 251; Marcel, 1951/2001, p. 191). For this reason, the French

thinker can argue that the God whose death Nietzsche testified to is not the God of living prayer, of adoration, and of aid, but rather the God of theodicy (Marcel, 1955/1956b, p. 59).

Marcel holds that this divinity is, above all, a presence to whom one invokes and by whom one is addressed—a living and intervening presence within history—one that cannot be accessed by describing, in the third person, the attributes we have glimpsed from a distance. The only way to access the absolute *Thou* is to enter into relationship with Him, to live with Him, and to engage in constant dialogue. The celebrated proofs of the existence of God, while impeccable from a logical and demonstrative standpoint, convince only those who are already convinced—that is, those who already have faith and live in a reciprocal friendship with the divine Being. Precisely because this dialogue and this shared life constitute the authentic way of accessing God. This means, paradoxically, that the proof is effective precisely where it can be dispensed with (Marcel, 1940/1959, p. 201; 2002, p. 339).

For those who do not maintain this relationship of call and response with the absolute *Thou*, demonstrations of the existence of God will amount to no more than a brilliant intellectual exercise, but one without any radical impact on their vital trajectory. This is because from the analysis of an object one can never demonstrate a presence (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, p. 187; Marcel, 1968/1971b, p. 167). Such an attempt would imply an improper intellectualization of a presence—a reduction and, to some extent, a betrayal; one could even say that it amounts to a relapse into idolatry, insofar as a degraded image of God is taken for God Himself (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, p. 188). The only way to demonstrate the existence of a personal being—among them, the divine Being—is through participation in that being's life and commitment to the way in which it intervenes in and transfigures existence (Marcel, 1934/2003, p. 156). Marcel does not, of course, propose silence about God, nor does he seek the disappearance of the arguments of theodicy; rather, he seeks a renewed mode of expression whose primary source is personal experiences of communion with the absolute *Thou* (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, p. 197).

For Marcel, prayer is the most genuine experience of dialogue and communion with divinity. It is the instance in which the person asks for the action of grace and in which grace intervenes so as to bring forth the subject's response. Marcel conceives prayer as both dialogue and shared life with the absolute *Thou*. Through prayer, all of Being—originating from divinity—manifests itself as presence, and not merely as object or problem, by becoming the vehicle of the divine call. Without the constant practice of prayer, the subject distances himself or herself from this presence, dissolving it into a merely remembered concept, no longer truly present. At this point, we find in Romano Guardini (1961/2006) a conviction similar to that of Gabriel Marcel: "Without prayer, faith withers and religious life atrophies. Just as one cannot live without breathing, one cannot, in the long run, be a Christian without praying" (p. 32). In the same vein, Mauti (2007) has recovered John Henry Newman's conception of prayer, which he likewise compares to the body's breathing, emphasizing that without it the soul cannot be considered alive (p. 351).

Grace, for his part, is understood by the philosopher as the invitation and proposal of the absolute *Thou* to create life—that is, to restart it along unforeseen paths once His initiative has been welcomed. Love and dialogue, as present in prayer, are in this sense always creative.

The call of the source of Being, in asking for consent to its proposal, creates freedom within us. This freedom does not consist in an undifferentiated capacity to choose among available alternatives, but in the response that the call of the absolute *Thou* has elicited within us. For this very reason, we do not receive a response from God if we ourselves do not respond. As has rightly been noted, the human being can remain free only insofar as he or she remains bound to transcendence (Negomireanu, 2013, p. 60). For this reason, openness to grace—the loving attentiveness to the proposal of the absolute *Thou* that prayer entails—is an unpredictable and truly "revolutionary" act. Through it, everything that came before may be called into question anew, subjected to the scrutiny of a power that transcends us, and from which there may arise an unexpected call inviting a new response capable of altering the course of events (Blesa Aledo, 2012, p. 442; Marcel, 1933/1987, pp. 63–66). Authentic faith, which invites prayer, always contains this "danger" that every plan may need to be

restarted; for this very reason, faith must not remain settled and enclosed, but must be continually renewed through recourse to unpredictable prayer (López Luengos, 2012, p. 93; Marcel, 1940/1959, p. 117; 2002, p. 305).

The very beginning of prayer already represents a change, insofar as it entails the attitude of placing oneself at the disposal of the One in whom one trusts, thereby bringing peace and inner transformation (Marcel, 2002, p. 279). Prayer is neither a fatalistic acceptance of God's will nor a mere instance for the fulfillment of desires, but a free and creative relationship of mutual questions and responses with the divine person (Grassi, 2024, p. 153; Moeller, 1953/1960, p. 274). The prayer of the faithful is always heard, yet no one can be certain in what manner it will be answered, since it remains suspended within the mysterious will of an inexhaustible and ever-surprising Being: "To pray for a being is to have faith in the possible efficacy of that prayer, and even—so it seems to me—to be convinced that this prayer is not in vain, even if it is not materially granted" (Marcel, 1927/1956a, p. 221). The legitimate petition of prayer is surpassed by a prior act of praise and thanksgiving for the fact of being allowed to be inserted into a life that infinitely exceeds us (Marcel, 1968/1971b, p. 173; 2002, p. 280). Certainly, every prayer enriches me; it allows me to participate more fully in Being precisely because it opens me to another (Valderrey, 1976, p. 171).

Joseph Ratzinger (2000/2001) has reflected on prayer in terms that display a remarkable affinity with Gabriel Marcel's perspective: "When we fold our hands in prayer, what we express is precisely this: we place our hands in His; with our hands we place our destiny in His hand; trusting in His fidelity, we promise Him our fidelity" (p. 228).

Prayer is, in itself, a refusal to remain enclosed within oneself, insofar as it entails the invocation of another; but also because, through it, one enters not only into communion with God, but with all those who ask that the mystery of Being be revealed to them. In praying, I am incorporated into a community that belongs both to the visible world and to the transcendent one (Marcel, 2002, p. 275). Invocation, like every relationship, presupposes a community and finds its authentic meaning in universal salvation—that is, the salvation of all those

who long to join that civility which is the fullness of Being, present as a demand within the intimacy of each person (Grassi, 2016, p. 158; 2024, p. 173; Valderrey, 1976, p. 172).

Marcel understands salvation as the fulfillment of the demand for the fullness of Being present in every person—that is, as the satisfaction that comes from being in the presence of the original *we*, to which divinity constantly invites us to belong. The demand of Being unites human beings in their condition as wayfarers and will unite them in their salvation when that demand is consummated (Marcel, 2002, p. 111). For this reason, a purely individual salvation makes no sense; indeed, such a notion would be contradictory (Grassi, 2024, p. 143).

At this point, Marcel can maintain that, in order to speak about God, it is first necessary to speak *to* Him. To pray is the fullest way of thinking about God, insofar as it entails thinking *with* Him rather than merely thinking *about* Him (Marcel, 1940/1959, p. 166; 1934/2003, p. 32). Thought about God cannot dispense with a form of thinking and a moral attitude that invokes Him and disposes itself to His response. The most rigorous expression of metaphysics consists in seeking the appropriate method for knowing that which constitutes the horizon of its concerns.

Now, the foundation of all reality is not a God understood as a finished substance, but a personal God who is presence—who interpellates and responds. Access to Him necessarily depends on our participation in His life and on our availability for Him to intervene in our history (Grassi, 2016, p. 158). We can think about God, and engage in first philosophy, only if there is first a coexistence with the divine *Thou*—that is, if we participate in a shared life of communion, share a history, and think together with Him, constituting our thought in relation to Him. We cannot speak about God if there is not first an alliance and friendship with Him.

In this sense, Marcel represents an attempt to de-objectify or de-reify God and to think of Him truly as a *Thou*. Rather than thinking anthropocentrically, the philosopher seeks to think of God *personally*—as a person, the source of

volitional, rational, and relational acts (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, pp. 248–251). This absolute *Thou* is closer to the Hebrew notion of the divine: a Lord who intervenes, interpellates, makes covenants, forgives, conceals Himself, but also reveals Himself and remains unpredictable. The Greek philosophical notion of divinity, by contrast, is more closely associated with an impersonal cosmic order (Blázquez Carmona, 1988, p. 250).

On the other hand, Marcel would not deny that God is Being itself, *ipsum esse subsistens*, as Thomas Aquinas holds (1274/2001, p. 197; *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 11); he would simply remind us that this Being itself, in which all things participate analogically, is originally a person in communion, and that it is precisely this communion that brings us closer to the heart of the divine (Negomireanu, 2013, p. 60).

For this reason, it is indispensable that, if philosophy wishes to know the reality that transcends the world, it grant prayer and the expectation of grace the highest importance. The metaphysician cannot separate intellectual labor from receptivity to God's revelation. It is therefore not surprising that, for Marcel, metaphysics and holiness walk along the same path of prayer, since both seek the same mystery of Being—that is, that Person who provides the foundation of our dignity and the meaning of our existence (Grassi, 2009, p. 27; Rodríguez Piñero, 2024, p. 118; Valderrey, 1976, p. 174). If one truly wishes to practice metaphysics, the philosopher must seek the method and the moral disposition that allow not only a deeper understanding, but also a life inundated by the will of the absolute *Thou* who seeks and exhorts him or her. Saints, insofar as they are methodologically prayerful, are the most accomplished metaphysicians; and metaphysicians, insofar as they are truly disposed to know that first cause, are the ones most open to adoration and prayer, so that the presence which is the origin of Being may reveal itself.

If we wish to practice a metaphysics that is methodologically sound, we will require not only the philosopher's intellectual acumen, but also his or her testimony: "without the testimony of the saint, the ontological problematic remains purely formal" (Marcel, 1968/1971b, p. 169; 1945/2005, p. 332). Without the pilgrimage toward holiness, the ontological problematic remains at a purely

abstract and intellectualist level (Marcel, 1934/2003, p. 199). According to Marcel, the revitalization of metaphysics requires the establishment of prayer at the very heart of first philosophy. If methods constitute the most appropriate path toward the truth one seeks, then prayer must also be counted among the methods necessary for the success of philosophical inquiry.

Marcel (1968/1971b) maintains that he is in no way exceeding the strictly philosophical domain. The conclusions he reaches arise from concrete experience and can be accepted without adherence to any particular dogma of faith (pp. 175–176). For example, Valderrey (1976) argues that the term *grace* does not appear in Marcel's work in a Christian theological sense, but is understood simply as gratuitous gift, vocation, and call (p. 166). The French philosopher seeks the resources necessary to restore religious philosophy, given its resounding failure to show others the truth of the reality it studies—since that reality is a mystery and a new life in which we participate, rather than a mere problem that we solve (López Luengos, 2012, p. 48).

Nevertheless, the similarities between the positions adopted by Marcel and certain key notions within the Christian faith are undeniable: communion, encounter, holiness, salvation, charity, grace, the human and the divine person, among others. It is true that he never ceases to practice philosophy with the autonomy of its own tools; yet it seems difficult to argue that his philosophical investigations can be so easily separated from the Judeo-Christian tradition from which they arose, as he himself maintains. It is also true that Marcel does not do theology, but philosophy; however, it is evident that he draws upon theological terms in order to enrich and expand the resources of his philosophical thought. Marcel does not claim that only saints can be metaphysicians; rather, he affirms that it is not possible to engage in metaphysics without taking into account the testimony of the saint and without having at least begun the path toward holiness—understood as a total availability to grace, as he conceives it within his philosophical proposal. Despite the Judeo-Christian influence and his experience of faith, we consider that these do not in any way diminish the rigor or the universality of his thought.

God should not be treated as an object, as though He were a geometrical figure whose dimensions could be measured. Rather, God must be regarded as a person, profoundly interested in addressing and interpellating us (Marcel, 1968/1971b, p. 162). All reflection on the divine must arise as a response to that interpellation, as the fruit of the encounter between God and the human being. Whether it concerns this encounter with the eternal *Thou* or an encounter with another human being, it is always the testimony of that encounter that constitutes the foundation of any philosophical proposal. Indeed, for Gabriel Marcel (1968/1971b), Being itself manifests as a call. Thus, personal testimony—especially the testimony of prayer and of dialogue with God—becomes the authentic methodology of Marcellian metaphysical knowledge (p. 167).

For this reason, there can be no truth without the profound stirring provoked by an authentic encounter—an encounter that must be capable of being testified universally, *urbi et orbi*. In other words, there is no truth without a radical transformation of existence: the person himself or herself must change. Not only does truth occur; a new beginning for the human being occurs as well. In Marcel's view, truth is not reduced to an abstract judgment; rather, it is testified to and made evident in the life of an integral and committed person who has been transformed by the encounter and has inaugurated a new beginning of existence.

## Conclusions

Once Gabriel Marcel's works have been examined, it is possible to offer the following responses.

First, within the intersubjective experiences emphasized by Marcel—such as fidelity, hope, and charity—the subject finds a progressive access to a deeper understanding of the ontological mystery, since these are experiences that awaken and nourish thought. Now, this mystery of Being, which is not a mere problem standing before us but rather that in which we participate and to which we commit ourselves, is present within us as a demand for fullness.

More than a desire, it is a call to which we long to respond. This call comes from the absolute *Thou*, who addresses us and demands a response from us. The response we give to that invocation, together with our own invocation of the absolute *Thou*, progressively fulfills our demand for Being. The reason for this is that, in this dialogue and mutual interpellation, we enter into a relationship and an alliance with the absolute *Thou*, who is God Himself—the fullness of Being in which all reality participates. The fullness of Being is a *Thou* who calls and responds; therefore, in intersubjective experiences we find both the entry point and the path toward an ever-greater fullness: “Love transcends the opposition between the same and the other insofar as it establishes us in Being” (Marcel, 1934/2003, p. 141).

Thus, access to the personal Being of God is possible only through invocation, response, attentiveness, docility, petition, and gratitude—elements that converge in prayer. We know God—fullness of Being and invoking *Thou*—by asking Him to show His face. Just as one has spoken of a praying theology, done on one's knees, Marcel proposes a metaphysics transformed into supplication, which asks that the fullness of Being reveal itself (Benedict XVI, 2007; von Balthasar, 1987, p. 493). Prayer is the verification of coexistence, friendship, and shared life between the human being and God. Only within this coexistence, in the mutual experience of call and response, can we know who God is—and, what amounts to the same thing, what the fullness of Being is: “to pray to God is, without a doubt, the only way of thinking about God” (Marcel, 1934/2003, p. 32).

Consequently, the metaphysician cannot separate his or her investigation from personal conversion, insofar as that which awakens the interest of the intellect—prayer—is the very same reality that renders the person available for God's will and exhortation to act within him or her: “the practical problem and the metaphysical problem tend to merge” (Marcel, 1954/1955, p. 109). Metaphysics cannot be practiced without this existential commitment, without assuming the risk that the absolute *Thou* may intervene in the individual's history. The path that leads to metaphysical wisdom coincides with the path that leads to holiness: “holiness is the true introduction to ontology” (Marcel, 1933/1987, p. 75).

Therefore, only through prayer can we attain the goals that metaphysics has always pursued—namely, the knowledge of Being qua Being. It is thus necessary to conclude that, according to Marcel's proposal, prayer must be regarded as one more method among those required for the practice of philosophy. If the fullness of Being is a Person, philosophy cannot remain solely an impersonal discourse; rather, it must also be understood as an unforeseen and unpredictable conversation with the absolute *Thou* and with a communion of persons: “God can give Himself to me as absolute Presence only in adoration” (Marcel, 1934/2003, p. 156). Marcel understands adoration as the response that unites action and understanding in the face of the experience of the infinite and inexhaustible value of that *Thou* who calls and summons.

Although Marcel's proposal may appear revolutionary or even unviable, he himself would reply that what matters is reaching the horizon that first philosophy has always sought—namely, Being—even if this entails changing the customary methods hitherto followed within the discipline.

One might claim that the French philosopher is proposing the annulment of metaphysics; however, we believe it more accurate to state that what is observed here is, rather, an attempt to expand and crown metaphysical work: a surpassing that preserves what came before, but in no way implies its destruction. Metaphysicians are by no means required to abandon their arguments, analyses, analogies, distinctions, syllogisms, intuitions, or deductions. What is demanded of them is to apply these tools to a richer, more unpredictable, and more abundant material, because it is now not only logical reasoning that draws them closer to God, but also the experience of coexistence and dialogue with Him. Undoubtedly, philosophers will have much more to say about the ontological mystery if, instead of observing it solely from a distance as a problem, they participate in its life and become involved with it, as one commits oneself to the life of a friend.

Second, Marcel questions the persuasive force of traditional demonstrations of the existence of God insofar as these ground their efficacy solely in logical impeccability. For him, since God is a personal Being, the

affirmation of His existence can come only through the testimony of another and, through that testimony, within the encounter itself with eternal Being. Hence his philosophy seeks to develop all the metaphysical implications of a notion such as encounter, generally neglected by philosophers. We know God only to the extent that we participate in a communion.

Of course, Marcel does not intend to turn philosophy into a personal diary or a collection of subjective experiences, but rather to begin from the concreteness of existence in order to develop and conceptually communicate certain elements that can be universalized and offered to the critical discernment of all. For this reason, we do not agree with the claim that the type of universality proper to metaphysics fails to find an adequate expression in Marcel (Grassi, 2009, pp. 26–27). It is certainly not a traditional expression; yet this is because he works with a “material” never before employed in ontology—namely, encounter—which requires an unprecedented formulation both in its notions and in its terminology. Nevertheless, his postulates may aspire to the same universality as any other metaphysical system.

Metaphysics, consequently, undergoes a profound transfiguration when it moves from the third to the second person: thought is consummated in prayer (Marcel, 1968/1971b, p. 176). In this way, it seeks to take into account certain existential elements that, due to the impersonal, objectifying, and problem-centered scruple of philosophy throughout its history, had been relegated—thereby losing not only human wisdom, but humanity itself.

Nevertheless, we believe that Marcel overstates his critique by recognizing no persuasive force whatsoever in the proofs of the existence of God. At least those proofs that possess an *a posteriori* character cannot be dismissed as merely intellectual, since their syllogistic order always begins from a sensible experience common to human beings (Gilson, 1913/1989, p. 85; Thomas Aquinas, 1274/2001, pp. 110–111; *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 1). Likewise, it would be excessive to claim that philosophical proofs and arguments do not lead to faith or to any form of knowledge of God.

It is true that, taken by themselves, they may lead only to a basic, generic, and precarious level of knowledge when compared to that attained through fidelity and testimony. Nevertheless, there are numerous accounts of major conversions whose beginnings can be traced to the reading of these philosophical arguments and lines of reasoning, which—although they required the aid of grace and witnesses—constituted the first glimpse and the initial disposition for the encounter with the personal Being who is the source of all being (Augustine of Hippo, 400/2010, VII, p. 333). It is true that such proofs focus on the order and constitution of the world; but could not some trace of God's personal character be found precisely within that cosmic harmony? In this sense, O'Callaghan (1989) detects in Marcel a certain mistrust—one not entirely justified—regarding the possibility that philosophy and the knowledge of God might have any beginning in extra-human nature (p. 90).

Faced with the concern that Marcel might be overstepping the bounds of philosophy and confusing metaphysics with faith, the following should be noted: his philosophical work always remains within the methods proper to the discipline. There is no confusion in his writings between the standpoint of the believer and that of the philosopher; rather, his thought “still situates itself on a level prior to what is properly religious” (Marcel, 1968/1971b, p. 176). Anyone, regardless of religious belief, can follow the concatenation of his arguments, which possess an intrinsic and independent value.

Nevertheless, this does not eliminate the fact that his philosophy is strongly influenced by Christianity and, more specifically, by Catholicism. Such influence does not diminish the philosophical value of his work, but it does prevent Marcel from sharply separating philosophy and faith, as he sometimes intended and explicitly claimed (O'Callaghan, 1989, p. 80). Indeed, one may ask whether the call of the absolute *Thou* has the same intensity for a person of faith as for one without faith. Similarly, whether availability and permeability to the action of grace can be the same in someone who does not believe in its existence. Prayer, as we have seen, is fundamental to the highest aim of metaphysics; yet could it be of equal interest to someone who does not believe that God receives prayer? To what extent can someone who does not pray advance metaphysically?

Marcel is correct in affirming that his thought has always respected the autonomy of philosophy and that, in this sense, it remains open to the same critical scrutiny as all other philosophical systems. However, it must be emphasized that the access to the ontological mystery he proposes—although presented as a secular path open to all metaphysicians of the world—prepares the encounter with a God who is not the God of all religions, but a very specific personal God: merciful and loving, proper to the Judeo-Christian tradition (Lozano, 2006, p. 241). Thus, although his arguments remain firmly within the philosophical domain without becoming theology, it is evident that they advance—consciously and lucidly, though the philosopher rarely states it explicitly—toward their constitution as *preambula fidei*.

In summary, our hypothesis has been confirmed, although it proves insufficient to encompass the entirety of Marcel's thought. Prayer is indeed the method for entering into a living relationship with God, and it constitutes the most adequate path for knowing Him and for consummating the metaphysical endeavor. However, it must be added that the character of invocation, interpellation, and dialogue permeates not only metaphysics, but all areas of Marcelian thought: anthropology, aesthetics, and ethics, among others, are unintelligible without this dialogical dimension. His work, ultimately, is a wisdom of prayer and response.

Moreover, one element not foreseen in our initial hypothesis must be incorporated: metaphysics is not merely an intellectual aspiration, but the expression of a profound demand for fullness that can be satisfied only in the mystery of a God who—together with truth and through a long pilgrimage marked by advances and setbacks—can also grant us joy and holiness.

## Author Contribution Statement

In the preparation of the article, David Solís Nova was responsible for the bibliographic review of Gabriel Marcel and his principal interpreters, as well as for examining the response to the research question and drafting the theoretical

framework. Ángela Alarcón Alvear developed the analytical section related to the role of intersubjectivity as mediation for access to the mystery of Being, and collaborated in the formulation of the hypothesis and the discussion of the philosophical results. Andrea Báez Alarcón also participated in the formulation of the hypothesis and carried out the final review of the manuscript, ensuring coherence, clarity of writing, and accuracy of references.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any institution or association of any kind. Likewise, Universidad Católica Luis Amigó assumes no responsibility for the management of copyright by the authors in their articles; therefore, the accuracy and completeness of citations and references are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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