**Title:** Complementary understandings of availability: Jean Vanier in conversation with the philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Gabriel Marcel.

**Abstract**

There has been a significant shift in twentieth century philosophy towards ‘other-person-ness’ where availability and attentiveness to the other seem to have taken central stage. Although not always accepted as philosophers in the conventional sense, the philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Gabriel Marcel were at the forefront of this new move. This article puts Jean Vanier in conversation with Levinas and Marcel in order to tease out the complementarity of their philosophical approaches. While there is much that the three philosophers have in common, including the question of the relationship of faith to philosophy, there is also a clear progression in thinking. Levinas offers an uncompromising responsibility and availability for the other who remains an ‘absolute other’; Marcel reminds that the other is also my neighbor for whom my presence denotes my availability; Vanier in turn adds a radically new dimension. Rather than a one-way street of availability to the other, Vanier opens up a two-way street where the other, who often seems very different, reveals our mutual vulnerability and demonstrates that living by the heart can lead us all to becoming truly human.

**Key words**: Jean Vanier, Emmanuel Levinas, Gabriel Marcel, Availability, Presence, Disability

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**Introduction**

Availability is a relative new-comer to philosophy because it is associated with the relationship of the self with the other. In what is regarded as an authoritative analysis of modern philosophy, the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier pointed out that classical philosophy used to leave "other-person-ness" "strangely alone". However, in the twentieth century philosophical reflection on subjectivity and questions on what separated the self from things gave way in existentialism to intersubjectivity, the separation of the self from the other, and thus "other-person-ness" was raised to its "central position" (Mounier, 1948, p.72). As Mounier explained "we always picture another-person as *someone I can see*. Now, he is also someone *who can see me*"(Mounier, 1948, p. 75). In this "other-person-ness" understandings of availability are found, and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973), and later Jean Vanier (1928–2019) were at the forefront of this new approach in philosophy.

Vanier was a generation younger than his contemporaries, Levinas and Marcel; nevertheless, all three philosophers shared a common concern for the other at a time when philosophy was beginning to emerge from a concentration on the self. This attentiveness to the other was described by Marcel as *disponibilité*, "availability". Vanier’s contribution to theories of availability was considerable. From his personal experience and the common experience of L’Arche communities Vanier identified the transformative effect that the other could have on the self whereby the self could become truly more human (Vanier, 1998, p. 90). More significantly he grew to appreciate the weakness of the other, particularly the very marginalized other with intellectual disabilities, whose very availability in vulnerability turned common assumptions about power and relationships on their heads. The utter availability of the vulnerable other revealed to Vanier his deepest needs and what it meant to be human. For Vanier, availability to the other in a shared life was important. However, more important for understandings of availability was Vanier's contention that these "others", especially those who are weak and vulnerable, had "something important to bring to our world today" (Vanier, 2010, p. 19).

Certainly, there were other philosophers, notably Martin Buber, who influenced Vanier's own philosophical approach. Notably, Buber was one of the few philosophers regularly quoted by Vanier (see for instance Vanier, 1989, p. 8; 1998, pp. 81, 133, 139; 2004, p. 94), and Buber’s "I-Thou" modes of existence expressed the encounter between people that Vanier found so energizing (Vanier, 1998, p. 139). However, not so well recognized is that a number of the themes developed by Vanier can be found in the thought of Levinas and Marcel. Seen through the prisms of Levinas and Marcel, these themes, and consequently Vanier's deeper perspectives, stand out. Clearly the philosophical themes advanced by both Levinas and Marcel were far reaching and went beyond attentiveness to the other. Nevertheless an exploration of some of the points that Levinas and Marcel have in common with Vanier's philosophical concerns not only provide a philosophical context for Vanier's writings but also show where Vanier has brought out the significance of the other, notably people with intellectual disabilities, who demonstrate that they are the ones who are truly available to the other.

This article begins by putting Vanier together with Levinas and Marcel in their general context of twentieth century French philosophy and the turn to ethics and relationship. For each of the three philosophers theology was significant, though in notably different ways, in identifying what could or could not be said about the other and therefore about availability. The section on availability and a return to faith indicates why Vanier's approach to availability developed the approaches of Levinas and Marcel. The article then considers each of the philosophers in turn in order to bring out the complementarity of Vanier's understanding of availability or attentiveness to the other.

**Vanier in conversation with Levinas and Marcel**

To place Vanier's insights in conversation with the writings of the highly influential philosophers Levinas and Marcel should come as no great surprise. After all, in terms of cultural context the three men were contemporaries, French speakers, and lived in Paris at roughly the same time even though Marcel was the only native Frenchman of the three. There is ample evidence that Levinas and Marcel met, notably at the Friday and Saturday gatherings organized by Marcel in his apartment near the Sorbonne both before and after the Second World War, and both taught on various philosophy courses (Levinas, 2001, pp. 42–43). According to Levinas, he and Marcel independently came to reflect on the "alterity of the other". Their reflections were separate also from Buber’s I-Thou relationship which was nevertheless influential (Levinas, 2001, pp. 72, 179). Younger than Marcel and Levinas, Vanier was studying philosophy in Paris in the 1950s where he began his doctoral thesis on happiness and the ethics of Aristotle. As a young philosophy student it is difficult not to assume that Vanier was well acquainted with the thought of the two older philosophers. Furthermore, it seems that Marcel’s work was both well-known and well received in Canada from the 1940s onwards, and when Vanier was teaching ethics at the University of Toronto in 1964 (Spink, 2006, p. 55) there was still considerable interest in Marcel’s thought among the university students (Plourde, 1979).

Vanier's approach to philosophy appears to fit well with the twentieth century French intellectual tradition and what is recognized as a specific French approach: "wide ranging, historically informed, often beyond the boundaries of philosophy" (Gutting, 2011, p.9). In general, the French academic system advocated engagement with other disciplines such as psychology, and students were encouraged to have a wide view and be creative rather than being disciples of great thinkers (Gutting, 2011, pp. 12, 17). Philosophy in France was "part of the general culture" (Gutting, 2011, p. 7). Twentieth century France was also not adverse to the notion of philosophers who did not develop a base in "the academic system", but operated as free standing intellectuals, known through books and public lectures (Gutting, 2001, p. 16), Marcel being a case in point. Many of Vanier's writings were adapted from public lectures and his book *Becoming Human* (1998) was essentially five talks given on a Canadian radio program.

Furthermore, all three philosophers have in common the approach to philosophy that placed the focus on the self being available to "the other". This availability had a different and specific emphasis for each philosopher and, in terms of putting the three in conversation, a development can be discerned from Levinas and a non-reciprocal availability for the absolute and vulnerable other, to Marcel and a more relative availability to the other who was "like me", to Vanier and an availability that was not only reciprocal but also one that could speak about the other and the other in turn could speak about the self. Certainly, there is not a hard distinction between the three philosophers since there are some overlaps in their understandings of availability, thus it is useful to see Vanier's approach as both developing and complementing the understandings of Levinas and Marcel.

For Vanier, availability entailed "a quality of attentiveness" directed specifically toward the other (Vanier, 1989, p. 162). In order to explore the understandings of availability presented by Levinas and Marcel, and the significant way in which Vanier's approach complements these understandings, it is important to appreciate the philosophical context in which these understandings developed. On the one hand many French philosophers had become suspicious of ethics since ethics either reduced every person to the same or had to rely on religious transcendence for meaning, and in a heavily secular atmosphere this was unacceptable (Gutting, 2011, p. 110). On the other hand, through phenomenology and its attention to the description of phenomena apparent to consciousness a greater emphasis on concrete experience rather than abstract thought for informing philosophy was beginning to emerge. This turn to experience inevitably included psychology and thinking about the "other".

**The turn to ethics, relationship, and responsibility**

For Levinas and Marcel, the starting point for the turn toward ethics, relationship, and responsibility came through dissatisfaction with the traditional philosophical approaches of idealism and objectivism. This dissatisfaction was not without contemporary critique (see for instance de Corte, 1935), and this might explain why for some Levinas and Marcel were not considered to be serious philosophers; indeed, their importance has only recently been fully appreciated. Levinas took a particularly stern view of this tradition. According to Levinas (1961) "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same", (p. 43) since Western philosophy always claimed to understand reality completely, to place everything within a totality, an all-encompassing whole. Levinas charted this tradition from the first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics,* "All men by nature aspire to knowledge", to the philosophy of Heidegger (Levinas, 1996, pp. 4, 100). On the one hand Levinas noted a move towards "the question of the present hour" as opposed to idealism and abstraction; on the other hand he observed the focus on "the meaning of being qua being" such that contemporary ontology "risks drowning in existence" (Levinas 1996, p. 3). Levinas was particularly concerned that traditional philosophy promoted a preoccupation of the self to the complete neglect of the other, and this preoccupation expressed itself clearly in the way in which traditional philosophy attempted to come to know the other by universalizing the same (Levinas, 1996, p. 11). In contrast to "totality", Levinas offered "infinity" where the self encountered an other but it was an other that the self could not simply include: the self was not in full possession of all reality. Levinas thus saw his philosophy as a call to freedom from this "imperialism of the same" and therefore a break with the previous philosophical tradition (Levinas, 1961, pp. 43, 87). For Levinas, this break was characterized by advocating ethics rather than ontology as first philosophy.

Marcel also saw his own philosophical approach as an "untiring battle against the spirit of abstraction" (Marcel, 1952, p. 1). However, in contrast to Levinas, he believed that otherness could be protected without destroying 2,500 years of philosophy (Treanor, 2006, p. 6). Indeed, Marcel pointed out that "the philosopher is placed in a given historical situation from which he is most unlikely to abstract himself completely" (Marcel, 1948, p. 29). Like Levinas, Marcel was particularly concerned that a purely rationalistic approach to philosophy built up ideologies of the human person that made the person into an object. To systemize in philosophy was to see everything as problematic and thus the person also became a problem to be solved, or persons were reduced to one aspect of their being (Marcel, 1952, p. 113). This reduction of the person extended also to the self who became dominated by conceptual systems and therefore the object of the self’s own thought. According to Marcel the response to abstract philosophy lay in the turn to concrete experience. As Marcel observed it was a gravely erroneous conception of philosophy to imagine "that the philosopher as such ought not concern himself with passing events, that his job on the contrary is to give laws in a timeless realm, and to consider contemporary occurrences with the same indifference with which a stroller through a wood considers the bustlings of an ant hill" (Marcel, 1949–1950, p. 36). However, the taking account of experience that Marcel had in mind was not merely to react to individual sense data. Rather it was to develop an "ear" for experience, being attuned to the situations the individual encountered in order to appreciate the significance in these situations and, above all, in encounters with other human beings (Jolin in Marcel, 1973, pp. xxii, 6).

Like Marcel, Vanier was suspicious of systems that all too easily became ideologies closed up in their own ideas and not open to difference (Vanier, 1998, pp. 47–48). Vanier's own approach was also founded on the significance of experience. Whereas Levinas located the beginnings of ontological philosophy in the thought of Aristotle, Vanier focused on Aristotle’s philosophy as ethics based specifically on experience, our "experience of desire", "the desire for fullness of life inscribed in every human being" (Vanier, 2001, pp. xi, 6). Indeed, Vanier explained that "Aristotle is not the father of intellectualism that he has at times been accused of being" (Vanier, 2001, p. 186). Nevertheless, Vanier also recognized that desire could be perverted and could lead to terrible abuse, citing the example of Hitler and those who "kill without reason, simply for the pleasure of killing" (Vanier, 2001, p. 197). This example is perhaps where a concern with the other and concrete experience come together in the historical context of the three philosophers in a way that cannot be underestimated. That experience was the Second World War.

Levinas, Marcel, and Vanier were personally affected each in their own way by the traumatic events of the Second World War. Unfit for medical service, Marcel had been an officer with the Red Cross during the First World War and one of his tasks was to deliver news to families about soldiers who were missing or killed (Marcel, 1971, pp. 89–90). During the Second World War Marcel retired to Lyons. He later interviewed Jews and those involved in resistance to the Nazis, and wrote dramas testifying to the suffering of Jewish families in occupied France. Levinas, a Lithuanian Jew, was an officer in the French army and became a prisoner of war. Members of his family were murdered by the Nazis in Lithuania. As just a schoolboy, the young Vanier and his family arrived in Britain from France as refugees and then went on to Canada. By 1942 the thirteen-year-old Vanier had become caught up in the military ideal to "do his bit" and he joined the British Navy in order to "be part of the struggle for peace and freedom" (Vanier, 2003, p. 6). He would soon find himself in Paris in 1945 where the Canadian Red Cross were dealing with the emaciated survivors from the concentration camps, a sight he said he could never forget (Spink, 2006, pp. 20–24; Fergusson, 2014).

According to Levinas (1986) the "trials of the twentieth century" were significant markers for the shift in French philosophy towards ethics and the other (p. 137). Kleinberg explains that this shift culminated in a break with the traditional philosophy associated with the Enlightenment and Neo-Kantianism, since this tradition could not provide answers to these trials (Kleinberg, 2005, pp. 3–11). The horrors of the First World War seemed to confirm the failure of nineteenth century ideas on natural human progress and of humanism itself. The notion that science would create a better world became suspect as technology was used to develop not only more sophisticated weapons but also poisonous gas. Optimism on human potential was extinguished in the face of the magnitude of the senseless loss of life. An ethics of responsibility seemed to have been demolished and replaced by an abdication of responsibility under the guise of duty and following orders. These trials and, in particular, the experience of inhumanity toward the other, notably in the experience of the Holocaust, turned the more abstract traditional philosophy towards the human condition.

Levinas located the human leaning towards inhumanity specifically in traditional Western philosophy. For Levinas, there was "something like a threat against all others" in a philosophy that focused on the "priority of being, this insistence on the oneself" (Levinas, 2001, p. 105). Levinas argued that in a philosophy based on ontology it was assumed that the other was "a limit" for me, a curb on my freedom (Levinas, 2001, p. 132). However, more seriously, Levinas claimed that the "origin of all violence" was encapsulated in "to be" as an insistence of self-preservation and affirmation of the self without regard for others (Levinas, 1998, Preface, viii). Levinas saw the emergence in the life lived by human beings of "the-devoting-of-oneself-to-the-other", an "otherwise than being" and found a certain ally in Marcel (Levinas, 1998, Preface, viii, p. 54). Prior to the Second World War both Marcel and Levinas anticipated this emphasis of concern for the other and they engaged wholeheartedly with a current of thought prevalent in French philosophy in the 1940s and 1950s that focused on the face-to-face ethical encounter between people as opposed to more abstract moral theories (see Moyn, 2005, p. 224). The two philosophers embraced the new emphasis on concrete experience and, in particular, the encounter with the Other. As Levinas (1986) explained, and pointing with approval to the influence of Marcel, philosophy, theology and "even public opinion" had attached significance to dialogue and this attested to the "new orientation" towards the "meaningful" and "spiritual" (p. 137).

Vanier's own experience of survivors from the concentration camps and the consequences of the dropping of the atom bombs led him to devote himself to "works of peace" through dialogue with others (Fergusson, 2014). Vanier's recognition of sources of conflict, the need for authentic dialogue, availability to the other, and the saving grace of encounter with the other made Vanier a clear heir of the legacy of Levinas and Marcel. Vanier observed that in general people felt lost and still lived in a world of divisions (Vanier, 1971, pp. 75–77). In this divided world availability as expressed by dialogue and communication were vital (Vanier, 2005, p. 35). Later in life Vanier began to see his whole adult life as being "oriented towards peacemaking" and his calling to found L'Arche as part of that journey "to better understand the causes of conflict and the way to resolve them through a deepening spirituality and in a love that flows from the heart of God" (Vanier, 2003, p. 6). Vanier noted that there were many sources of conflict including conflict within the self. Change, "crossing the barriers", and creating peace were possible by making oneself available to enter into "a true relationship" with others and this availability was "to discover who the other person is and reveal who we are", to "listen to and really meet one another" (Vanier, 2003, pp. 35, 41).

Despite the inhumanities of the twentieth century all three philosophers found joy in living and this was in contrast to the prevailing atmosphere of anxiety and hopelessness that characterized the French climate of the time as presented by philosophers like Sartre. For Levinas, life was full of joy and "life is love of life" (Levinas, 1961, p. 112). As Marcel observed, "the central deficiency in existentialist philosophies of anxiety … is the completely arbitrary overlooking of a fundamental experience … the *gaudium essendi, "*the joy of existing"" (Marcel, 1973, p. 42). However, Vanier found a remedy to this failure to appreciate the joy of life. According to Vanier, people with intellectual disabilities played an important part in reminding others of the joy of existing. In his experience they were "less complicated" and "often endowed with simple, loving and trusting hearts". With their "incredible way of welcoming people" they naturally demonstrated this "*joie de vivre* that attracts, opens hearts and brings joy" (Vanier, 2003, p. 71). In presenting people with intellectual disabilities as naturally able to live joyfully Vanier did not offer a vague optimism or idealistic vision. He recognized that disabled people often had carried much suffering in their lives, especially the suffering caused by rejection. This led him to consider the connection between joy and suffering as well as the need to work hard at creating an atmosphere of joy through being available to the other (Vanier, 1989, pp. 319, 327).

**Availability and a return to faith?**

In her discussion of Marcel’s understanding of availability Tattam argued that religion was part of availability because faith helped to create an attitude of openness. To a large extent acknowledging otherness was an act of faith (Tattam, 2016). This association of availability and religion seems to apply equally to Levinas and Vanier. For Levinas and Marcel, ancillary to the significance of ethics was the contested relationship of faith to philosophy, and how an attitude towards the other was a mark of self-transcendence that might ultimately lead to God. For all three philosophers their understandings of availability were forged through their different interpretations of the "other" and to a large extent those interpretations were related to how they understood the relationship of human beings to God who is entirely other as Creator to creation.

Notably, Gutting suggests that the "strongly secular and often anti-religious slant" of French philosophy in the twentieth century meant that initially the work of Levinas and Marcel was marginalized (Gutting, 2011, p. 138). As Gutting (2001) points out Marcel "remained the odd man out among French existentialists" because of his theism and political leanings (p. 102), Levinas was "geographically and institutionally" outside the "mainstream" (p. 354), additionally so because of his Jewish affiliation. The fact that Levinas and Marcel introduced God talk into their philosophical writings cannot be overlooked and in the context of French philosophical approaches in the twentieth century the relative openness of thinkers like Levinas to theology as a source alongside philosophy may have paved the way for the explicit openness to theology that Vanier undoubtedly displayed.

Although Levinas said that he did not come to "renew things" with his turn to the ethical, he did say that his approach was very different from his contemporaries (Levinas, 2001, p. 114). Perhaps the fact that he was outside the mainstream of current French philosophical thought and religion allowed him to take this more independent stance. Characterizing traditional systematic and ontologically based philosophy as "Greek", and relational philosophy as of "the Bible", Levinas agreed that in terms of sources of culture "Europe is the Bible and the Greeks" (Levinas, 2001, p. 64). In contrast to the "Greek" source which attempted to understand the totality of everything and as a consequence reduced everything to the same, "the fundamental thing traced in the Bible is a placing of the other as if in relation with me or, rather, the affirmation of my being as devoted to the other" (Levinas, 2001, p. 64). The Bible source of European culture affirmed "a primordial responsibility for "the other"" (Levinas, 2001, p. 182).

Gutting further points out that some twentieth century French philosophers were certainly religious, "but their religion was neither the source nor the justification of their philosophical views" (Gutting, 2001, p. 89). The case of Marcel seems to be more complex. Marcel thought that philosophy, the love of truth, might be linked with the love of God by a philosopher such as himself, but it need not have a "religious character" for all. Nevertheless, he also accepted that there could be "a whole theological background" that affected a person’s thinking whether they were aware of it or not (Marcel, 1949–1950, p. 71). Although he thought that a religious attitude might lie behind philosophy, Marcel seems to have much the same approach as Levinas to the absolute otherness of God. Marcel acknowledged that we could not think about finite beings in the same sense as we might think about God because "there is no question of such co-existence as that which may bind me to a fellow creature ... ‘God is not *someone who*’" (Marcel, 1949, pp. 31–32; 81). Moreover, Marcel believed that it was impossible to claim to imagine God’s attitude to any individual since we could not put ourselves in God’s place. Indeed, he was mistrustful of any theological attempt that relied on analogy to achieve this (Marcel, 1949, p. 136, n.1).

Certainly, the thinking of both Levinas and Marcel can be appreciated philosophically as well as theologically, and this has been made easier by the distance the two put between the human and the divine. Moreover, the growing body of secondary literature demonstrates that any initial reluctance has given way to seeing the increasing importance of both philosophers. In contrast to Levinas and Marcel, Vanier's philosophical approach was distinctly religious even though, like the two other philosophers, much of what he said could be appreciated without theology. In part Vanier's explicitly religious approach may be the result of a notably more tolerant cultural climate in France. Despite the dismissal of theology as infantile or nonsensical or obsolete, in the second half of the twentieth century there was a turn, or return, to theology, not "in terms of a relapse into former stages of thought", but rather a more complex turn that included the realization that religion "is significant for its capacity to open up and contextualize or problematize the relationship of the self to the other" (de Vries, 1999, pp. 2–3,12, 22). Gutting persuasively argues that twentieth century French philosophy was distinctive because unlike analytic philosophers who typically acted "as if there is nothing that cannot be understood conceptually", French philosophers were "particularly fascinated by what is not conceivable" (Gutting, 2011, p. 169). Moreover, phenomenology’s openness to the immediacy of lived experience need not exclude the mystery of religious experience (Gutting, 2011, pp. 139–140). Furthermore, the rise of French Catholic personalism brought with it a turn to practical philosophy that made use of Catholic social teaching centering on the person (Grieg 2017, p. 185).

One of the major differences between Vanier, Levinas, and Marcel was the way in which Vanier explicitly spoke about his religious faith as formative for his philosophical approach. As Vanier (2001) explained, "quite quickly I realized that the Gospel and Christian spirituality could not be divorced from human, philosophical and ethical thinking" (p. xiv). Rather than a focus on God as Absolutely Other and what is "not conceivable", Vanier's explicitly religious approach was essentially Christological. For instance, although he acknowledged that there was community life outside of Christianity, he stated that everything he said about life in community was inspired by his faith in Jesus (Vanier, 1989, p. 11). Vanier's approach seems to mirror the Christological emphasis of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and notably the specific understanding of human beings that emerged through reflection on Jesus, as expressed in the Council's document *Gaudium et Spes,* that "in reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (Paul VI, 1965, n.22; Wojtyła, 1980, p. 75). For Vanier, God the Father was revealed in God the Son not as Absolute Other but as brother, indeed Jesus was "hidden in the face of the poor": "Jesus reveals an even greater unity between the personal contemplation of the Eternal and the personal relationship and bonding with people who are broken and rejected" (Vanier, 1989, p. 95). Through the Incarnation "God is no longer distant or set apart from our world" (Vanier, 2004, p. 21). Jesus, "so beautifully human", revealed "the heart and face of God" and a personal relationship with Jesus "allows us to live a personal heart-to-heart relationship with others" (Vanier, 2004, pp. 52, 290, 138). To be sure, it cannot be said that God is totally unknown outside of Jesus Christ, nor can there be Christology without reference to God. Moreover, the full mystery of God remains unfathomable (International Theological Commission, 1982, 1.1–1.2; 3.2). Nevertheless Vanier took to heart the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter 25, that "whatsoever you did to the least of my brothers, you did to me" (Vanier, 2015, p. 29): each person, the self and the other, is united in a special way with Christ. The way in which Jesus is present especially in the weakest and most vulnerable people gave Vanier the opening to talk with confidence about the availability of those who were usually viewed as the others.

**Levinas on welcoming a face: availability to the other**

When Levinas spoke of first welcoming a face he did so in the context of the priority of the person over knowledge of the very being of the person: ethics over ontology (Levinas, 2001, p. 191). Availability for Levinas was framed in terms of an ethic of absolute responsibility for the other, moreover, a responsibility that was not reciprocal. Levinas was completely against the idea that this responsibility could be explained away by "the crudeness of a psychology that explains each intuition as eventually suggestive", referring to Freudian psychoanalytic practice (Levinas, 2001, p. 118). As Levinas (2001) said, "I have never been a Freudian" (p. 174). Although Levinas had studied psychology in the 1920s, he remained deeply suspicious of theories that retained the notion of a mode of being, or of a form of knowledge that claimed by reason to grasp the ethical relationship and this applied equally to the psychology of the unconscious (Levinas, 2001, p. 118; see Bergo, 2005, pp. 26–27). Instead Levinas claimed ethics as first philosophy since in the "order of meaning" inter-human relations, as represented by "the face", was "the beginning of intelligibility" (Levinas, 2001, p. 165). Ethics was prior because, rather than arising from a reference to a universal law, ethics arose in relation to the other as unique, where I come face to face with the vulnerable and defenseless other "in his nudity" (Levinas, 2001, p. 114). Levinas explained that ethics was not "a simple moralism of rules". Rather, ethics was "the original awakening of an I responsible for the other" where I am "elected to responsibility for the other" (Levinas, 2001, p. 182). For Levinas, this awakening was "the true beginning of the human and of spirituality": "in the call which the face of the other man addresses to me, I grasp in an immediate fashion the graces of love: spirituality, the lived experience of authentic humanity" (Levinas, 2001, p. 182).

In outlining this ethical process Levinas explained that prior to this awakening to the other there was the "first emergence of the self". This was a "stage of enjoyment of life and self-sufficiency", an "egoism" (2001, p. 212). This egotistical self was happily engaged in arbitrarily choosing and enjoying the world of objects. Since humans were sensing beings we tended to objectify things: things "offer themselves to enjoyment" and we use them (Levinas, 1991, p. 133). However, the relation to the other was not one of enjoyment in the way that we enjoyed objects: the relation to the other "is irreducible to the knowledge of an object" (Levinas, 2001, p. 72). In the emergence of the ethical self, I experienced that there was another outside of myself that was separate from me, and another, and a third other (Levinas, 2001, p. 115).

Levinas described the experience of the other in terms of an encounter with the face of the other and the call, "here I am", a call that demanded a response. According to Levinas the face "is not of the order of the seen, it is not an object". Rather the face represented more of a revelation of the other, "the without-defense". Through this encounter "responsibility arises in the strangeness of the other" and this responsibility entailed the obligation "to respect the other, to take the other into account" (Levinas, 2001, pp. 48–49). The "strangeness" of the other involves "the other as unique", and for Levinas this responsibility was "precisely not a simple kinship" (Levinas, 2001, p. 65). It was important for Levinas to maintain the absolute otherness of the other, even to deny that otherness is relative, and this absolute alterity also meant avoiding the perception of the other in terms of genus or species, since such a perception suggested a shared property and so inevitably became a way of objectifying the other. Moreover, Levinas was clear that the other was not other because of difference, or different attributes: "it is not difference which makes alterity: alterity makes difference" (Levinas, 2001, p. 106). For Levinas, the other always remained a stranger, "absolutely other", "absolutely separated" (Levinas 1961, pp. 197, 102). However this separation was not so much a gap of distance as transcendence, transcendence of the self beyond the self, that ultimately led to God: as Levinas explained "I do not deduce him [God] from causality, nor from the ground or origin of being, but rather from the face of the other. He comes to me, when I encounter the face" (Levinas, 2001, p. 135).

In ethical terms responsibility for the other cannot be escaped (Levinas, 1996, p. 29) since "I am chosen to answer to him" "as in the response to the call of God", I cannot either avoid the call of the other or decline that call" (Levinas, 2001, pp. 66, 110). For Levinas, responsibility came before freedom: "a responsibility not resting on any free commitment, that is, a responsibility without freedom … This way of being, without prior commitment, responsible for the other (*autrui*), amounts to the fact of human fellowship, prior to freedom" (Levinas, 1996, p. 91). Again, "as soon as I acknowledge that it is "I" who am responsible, I accept that my freedom is anteceded by an obligation to the other" (Levinas, in Kearney, 2004, p. 78). Levinas explained that this "chosenness" for responsibility was not a question of happiness, rather it was a matter of my own unique dignity, "not according to my weight as a being, but according to my presence to the other" (Levinas, 2001, pp. 66, 112). Notably for Levinas while the call of the other could not be denied, freedom lay in my response to this appeal: to give or to refuse (Levinas, 1961, p. 77). In the encounter with the face of the other freedom was liberated from mere arbitrary choice (Levinas, 1961, pp. 84–85). Levinas was reluctant to refer to the encounter with the other which is "straightaway my responsibility for him" as love. Instead he preferred to speak of "the taking upon oneself of the fate of the other". This was because he felt that the word "love" had become "worn out and debased" (Levinas, 2001, p. 165). In place of love or charity, which he saw as a Christian term, Levinas used the Hebrew term *hesed.* According to Levinas *hesed* carried with it appeals to mercy and love behind justice (Levinas, 2001, pp. 68–69). Moreover, Levinas was concerned that without justice charity ran "the risk of being wrong" (Levinas, 2001, p. 194). Nevertheless, justice had to be connected to charity as "an unlimited obligation in regard to the other" (Levinas, 2001, p. 223). Given the reliance on this obligation to the other founded on justice and backed by charity and mercy, Levinas regarded the relationship between the self and the other as "asymmetrical" (Levinas, 2001, p.118), indeed it is difficult to speak of this as a relation at all. Similarly, availability and responsibility were one-sided. Put simply, because alterity was absolute, the self could not impose a reciprocal experience of obligation on the other.

According to Levinas the absolute otherness of "the stranger" was connected to God: "the infinite is the absolute other" (Levinas, 1961, p. 49). In spite of developing his philosophy of the other "in a religious direction", Levinas maintained the absolute remoteness of God (Gutting, 2001, p. 360). In keeping conversation about God to a minimum Levinas recognized that it was problematic to speak about God "without striking a blow against the absoluteness that his word seems to signify"; including God in knowledge was to grasp him. Instead, "the-idea-of-the-Infinite-in-me, or my relation to God, comes to me in the concreteness of my relation to the other man, in the sociality which is my responsibility for the neighbour"; the face of the other "who from the first "asks for me"", "before any act of consciousness" is the crux of the idea of God (Levinas, 1986, Foreword xii–xiv).

In terms of availability, Levinas held out for the absolute alterity of the other undoubtedly to protect the other from any compromise and moreover to ensure that my responsibility for the other could never be conditional on the other’s response. To a large extent there is a sense of duty in this Levinasian availability where the face of the other commands my responsibility.

**Vanier and a comment on Levinas**

Levinas accepted the selfish ego of the un-awakened self, however he did not seem to set much store in psychology. Vanier was more accepting of psychology and perhaps more forgiving about the barriers that people had to being able to make themselves available to others. He noted that these walls were often the result of emotional wounds suffered during childhood and buried deep in the unconscious (Vanier, 2007, p. 13). In spite of being "more or less governed by instincts and drives that originate in the beautiful and painful experiences of childhood" over which we had "little control", Vanier still thought we were "more or less free as to the ways in which we might satisfy them" (Vanier, 1998, p. 107). Referring to Freud, Vanier pointed especially to the "protective shield" that people created around threatening feelings (Vanier, 1998, p. 156). Fear, selfish ego, the compulsive need to succeed, and failure to acknowledge and accept our own brokenness all contributed to our inner blockages (Vanier, 1998, p. 113). For Vanier, some people needed inner healing to be available to others. The difference between the two philosophers may however turn on the question of responsibility and freedom. According to Levinas responsibility was not chosen by the self, rather the self was chosen by the call to responsibility; freedom came in how the self responded to that call. As Levinas said, he did not think it was "truly possible" however indifferent a person might claim to be, to "pass a face by without greeting it, or without saying to oneself, "what will he ask of me?"" (Levinas, 2001, p. 184). Through his experience with people with intellectual disabilities Vanier came to realize that from the outset people tended to exclude others, especially those who were different, precisely because people did not want to listen to the other’s cry in case it did make demands on them. For Vanier, the cause of this "abyss that separates people" was insecurity and fear of the other, "those who are different" (Vanier, 1998, pp. 70–73). Put another way, for Levinas, "to throw oneself into water to save someone, without knowing how to swim, is to go toward the other totally" and was ethical conduct (Levinas, 2001, p. 127); Vanier understood that sometimes fear mitigated responsibility.

For Vanier, as with Levinas, the call of the other was still a foundational experience. Vanier said that he fundamentally believed that L'Arche began "as a response to a cry" he first heard when he visited an institution for men with learning disabilities (Vanier, 2010, pp. 19–20). Like Levinas Vanier saw that this awakening to the call of the other was also an awakening to a spirituality, that it "awakens and transforms the heart (Vanier, 2013, p. 31). However, Vanier also understood the creation of the "family" of L'Arche as the "response to the call from God" (Vanier, 2013, p. 11). Vanier recognized that in this particular family where people with disabilities lived their lives, there were professional norms to follow. Yet at the same time he said that L'Arche needed not just individual spirituality but "a spirituality of love, mutual gift of self, inspired by Jesus and the love of God", so that as a community together "we embody a deeper meaning than just being just a good place for people with disabilities to live" (Vanier, 2013, p. 13). This sense of community spirituality was necessary for mutual support, after all, as Vanier observed from his experience a "call for love" could awaken compassion in the one who hears, but equally it could bring fear, inner pain, anger and even hatred for the weaker person (Vanier, 1989, pp. 98–99).

Despite the difficulties that living in community could bring, Vanier thought that God chose each person in L'Arche to be in this community (Vanier, 1989, p. 44) reflecting perhaps the "chosenness" of Levinas for responsibility for the other. Whereas Levinas spoke of *hesed* connected to justice and obligation as well as charity, and it might seem as if response was essentially a matter of the will responding to duty, Vanier accepted that learning to love took a lifetime because the "Holy Spirit has to penetrate all corners" (Vanier, 1989, p. 57). Nevertheless, and in contrast to Levinas, for Vanier the other could not be a stranger. Certainly, Levinas spoke of the "famous love of the neighbor" of Scripture (see for instance Levinas, 2001, p. 127). However, Levinas seemed to refer to "neighbor" simply in terms of proximity whereas "stranger" suggested the alterity of the Other (Peperzak in Levinas, 1996, p. 65). Thus, Levinas could speak about "the stranger in the neighbor" (Levinas, 1974, p. 123). Certainly, the notion of the other as "stranger" connected to Vanier's view that more often than not the person with intellectual disabilities presented as "different", "strange", at times someone to whom it seemed impossible to relate (Vanier, 1998, pp. 78–79). Moreover, just as for Levinas the call of the stranger interrupts the self and awakens the self out of its own enjoyment by being human but not like the self, Vanier observed that the stranger "disturbs because he or she cannot enter into our patterns of thought or our ways of doing things" (Vanier, 1989, p. 266).

However, for Vanier, "when you welcome a stranger, someone who is "strange", you welcome Jesus" (Vanier, 2010b, p. 64). Levinas suggested that ultimately the face of the other led to the Absolute Other, to God and in order to preserve the absolute alterity of the divine for Levinas the other remained a stranger. For Vanier, "a new face of Christ" was discovered in "the little ones" (Vanier, 1989, p. 187). Moreover, and tying in with a mitigated responsibility, "I cannot welcome and receive Jesus unless I welcome my own weakness, my poverty, and my deepest needs" (Vanier, 2010b, p. 64).

For Levinas, availability to the other was linked to absolute responsibility for the other and so giving priority to the other: *après vous* (Levinas, 2001, p. 191). In contrast Marcel spoke about availability to the other in terms of intersubjectivity and relationship. For Marcel, it was not enough to welcome the other by responding to the call of the other and putting the other first. In order to be truly available to the other the self had to recognize itself as at the disposal of the other. However, this disposal was a fact before it was a task because, as Levinas also recognized, I am already essentially related to the other (Westphal in Marcel, 1964, p. xiii).

**Marcel on making room in myself: availability in presence**

In contrast to the absolute otherness of Levinas, Marcel thought it was possible to speak of the other. As opposed to absolute responsibility, Marcel argued for otherness in terms of a relation of the self to the other. The other remained a mystery to me, nevertheless I

encountered the other through a relationship of participation based on responsibility and love (Marcel, 1951, p. 15). The self and the other were not absolutely separate beings, nor did they form a unity (Marcel, 1949–1950, p. 182), but we did encounter each other as members of an essential community: as Gutting explains, "for Marcel the fundamental experience of philosophy is not "I am" but "we are"" and "we" also involves God (Gutting, 2001, p. 101).

Although Marcel thought that Levinas showed "great insight" in stressing the "face to face" relationship of the self to the other, Marcel noted the reluctance of Levinas to speak of "neighbor", never mind "my neighbor". Marcel used the term neighbor yet he seemed to prefer fraternity because fraternity went beyond neighbor and carried with it a sense of community. Moreover, and referring to the "liberty, equality, fraternity" notion connected to human dignity, fraternity went beyond equality and was essentially "hetero-centric" (Marcel, 1963, pp.130–132). Marcel suggested that fraternity rather than equality could sustain human dignity especially when considering "the human being in his nudity and weakness" (Marcel, 1963, p. 128). According to Marcel it was important for him "on the level of life, to enter into a fraternal relationship with people known to be different from myself, and on the level of reflective thought, to find out how this fraternal relationship was possible" (Marcel, 1971, p. 169). Simultaneously he recognized that this relationship remained "necessarily mysterious". To describe this entering into relationship Marcel used what he saw as a laden term, "encounter" (Marcel, 1971, p. 169) which he further called "co-presence", to be near to or with someone (Marcel, 1964, p. 12).

In this encounter *disponibilité* was of "capital importance" but, as Marcel noted, very difficult to express in English. Marcel explained that "availability" was the literal term, but a more natural expression was "handiness". Handiness related to having one’s resources to hand (Marcel, 1949–1950, p. 163). For Marcel, the term *disponibilité*, could also be roughly translated as disposability (as in be at the disposal of), or available to (Marcel, 1973, p. 242), and it described the way in which a person put his or her life at the disposal of a higher reality, God, or another person, or a cause (Marcel, 1964, p. 77). In terms of availability to the other, this disposability involved making "room for the other in myself", an "incohesion" (Marcel, 1964, p. 88). Marcel took pains to reflect on the difficulties of pinning down this idea of disposability and perhaps it was more clearly expressed in the notion of the gift of self as hospitality where "actually we are not concerned here with filling up some empty space with an alien presence, but of having the other person participate in a certain reality, in a certain plenitude" (Marcel, 1964, p. 28). Notably, Marcel added "to provide hospitality is truly to communicate something of oneself to the other" (Marcel, 1964, p. 91). The difference between Marcel and Levinas was particularly noticeable here. Certainly, fraternity entailed a level of responsibility for the other. Nevertheless, for Marcel the other was not a stranger, indeed, through the self becoming available to the other both could enter into a form of "communion", and Marcel used the example of the "mysterious and unshakable" testimony of music that appeared to draw people together (Marcel, 1963, p. 26).

Marcel often juxtaposed disposability with non-disposability and it would seem that to a large extent, non-disposability was the dominant human attitude, as shown by Marcel’s view that we lived in a "broken world". As Treanor points out, Marcel did not think that there was once an unbroken world, rather that the world is fallen (Treanor, 2006, p. 56). This world was "at war with itself", and characterized by "the will to power", where "togetherness" and human relationships counted for little (Marcel, 1949–1950, pp. 22, 28). Referring to "unhandiness" as the opposite of "handiness" the self-centered person was "unhandy" because he was "incapable of responding to calls made upon him" (Marcel, 1949–1950, p. 163). Marcel was clear that this lack of capacity was not merely a failure to attend to those less fortunate and, in notable contrast to Levinas, he presented a more psychological account of unavailability. Rather than availability being a matter of choice, in a more profound way the self-centered person remained "shut up in himself, in the petty circle of his private experience which forms a kind of hard shell round him which he is incapable of breaking through" (Marcel, 1949–1950, p. 163). Being "non-disposable" was "being occupied with self" and this preoccupation brought with it a sense of anxiety, the kind identified by Kierkegaard, a feeling of having "nothing to hold onto, and therefore "unhope"" (Marcel, 1949, pp. 73–74).

In his analysis of "this anxiety, this wound" Marcel spoke of "the experience of being torn by a contradiction between the all which I aspire to possess … and the obscure consciousness that after all I am nothing but an empty void" and hence "the craving to be confirmed from outside, by another" (Marcel, 1051, p. 16). Overwhelmed by a sense of competition and need for affirmation, refuge was found in the "cult of the individual" and the illusion of "moral egocentricity" where each established himself as "the centre" around which all the rest had to gravitate (Marcel, 1951, pp. 18–19). Marcel seems to have accepted that non-disposability was "bound up with the normal growth of experience" where even in situations when I thought I should feel some concern for the other, in all sincerity "I feel nothing; I am not at my own disposal" (Marcel, 1949, p. 70). Moreover, according to Marcel the dangers of non-disposability for the other person were clear: "when I am with a non-disposable person, I am conscious of being with someone for whom I do not exist, and so I am thrown back upon myself" (Marcel, 1949, p. 71).

For Marcel, the existential crises both for the person who felt unable to move out of non-disposability and for the other was of great magnitude: "the more non-disposable a man is, the less room there is in him for hope" adding "and we should here mention the growing non-disposability of the whole modern world" (Marcel, 1949, p. 78). Moreover, Marcel thought that non-disposability led to thinking of God as "someone who", a being among beings and that was at the root of atheism (Marcel, 1949, p. 81). Indeed, Marcel seems to have concluded that the human being’s apparently natural inclination to hold onto the self might require the action of grace to enable the gift of self (see Marcel, 1949, p. 83 n.1). Marcel described what he saw as a common feature of life: as a person’s life became more established and that person’s "mental space" became more rigid, the person showed decreasing concern for others and this inevitably led to increasing non-disposability. At the same time there was a growing sense of "not-at-homeness", uneasiness, alienation, and captivity which placed restrictions on fullness of life (Marcel, 1951, p. 21). The perennial question "what am I to do with my life?" presented a sense of being called, thus vocation and being open to the other was part of the answer (Marcel, 1951, p. 25). It was only "sanctity, realized in certain people" that could show us that this apparently "normal" state of increasing non-disposability, "of secular experience", was in fact a "perversion" (Marcel, 1949, pp. 70–71). For Marcel, the whole spiritual life revolved around reducing in ourselves the "part played by non-disposability" (Marcel, 1949, p. 69). As his 1951 work *Homo Viator, Introduction to the Metaphysic of Hope* showed Marcel held a real belief in the possibilities of human growth and, in particular, he thought of human beings as being on the road, in the process of becoming, journeying towards transcendence. Notably, the antidote to "unhope" was hope, a call to love and ultimately to God who is Love (Marcel, 1949, p. 79).

In his reflections on "being" and "having" Marcel observed that there was a connection between non-disposability and having (Marcel, 1949, p. 84). Marcel explained that human beings tended to identify the self with what one had (Marcel, 1949, p. 84). However, he noted that when a person was sorely tried, especially through illness and sacrifice, it became plain that the experience of "being" transcended "having" (Marcel, 1949, pp. 84–85). In what he called his "metaphysical diary" Marcel interrogated further the way in which "having" seemed to diminish availability and he found an explicit link to poverty. Taking charity as "presence, as absolute disposability" he concluded "things possessed get in the way". For Marcel, availability went hand in hand with charity and "at the heart of charity is presence in the sense of the absolute gift of one’s self" (Marcel, 1949, p. 69). However, Marcel also pointed out that the gift of self did not imply "impoverishment" to the giver. An example of an apparent impoverishment of the self and therefore inauthentic gift of self might be the feeling of being indispensable. According to Marcel feeling indispensable was linked to love of one's self regarded as "non-disposable". On the other hand, love of one's self regarded as "disposable" was "love of what God may make of me" (Marcel, 1949, p. 69).

For Marcel, availability to the other involved a particular understanding of "presence". Marcel explained that another person could be in the same room, even next to me, and we could communicate, "yet something essential is lacking"; the person was "somehow not really present to us ... communication without communion" (Marcel, 1949-1950, p. 205). Even if I am engaged in conversation with the other person, that person remains a stranger. Turning a phrase Marcel explained "he understands what I say to him, but he does not understand me" (Marcel, 1949-1950, p. 205). Notably, Marcel identified an effect on the self of this other being there, but not being present: "he makes me in some sense also a stranger to myself; I am not really myself while I am with him" (Marcel, 1949-1950, p. 205). Marcel then pointed to the opposite phenomenon, "when somebody"s presence does really make itself felt, it can refresh my inner being; it reveals me to myself, it makes me more fully myself". What made the difference between these two ways of being with the other was a particular attitude (Marcel, 1949–1950, pp. 204–205). Of course, an attitude of welcome and availability also involved a level of vulnerability. However, as Marcel (1949) pointed out "life cannot be played without stakes; life is inseparable from some sort of risk" (p. 70). Nevertheless, the risk Marcel was thinking about was not about an increase in vulnerability, rather it was a risk that everything became for me "a pure spectacle, perhaps even a spectacle lacking in sense" (Marcel, 1949, p. 17).

Marcel made an interesting connection between presence and mystery, and for the purpose of bringing Vanier into the conversation, it was a significant move. Marcel observed that there was a "mysterious character" to the presence of a sleeping person, notably a child, who appeared to be vulnerable, unprotected and in the power of the other. According to Marcel, and from the point of view of mystery, "it is just because this being is completely unprotected, that it is utterly at our mercy, that it is also invulnerable or sacred" (Marcel, 1949–1950, pp. 216–217). More significant still, especially given the treatment of people with intellectual disabilities, Marcel continued "and there can be no doubt at all that the strongest and most irrefutable mark of sheer barbarism that we could imagine would consist in the refusal to recognize this mysterious invulnerability". Marcel concluded that in societies dominated by "efficiency and output" this attitude of reverence appeared "at first" incomprehensible. The "formidable problem" was how to overcome these obstacles and restore this reverence (Marcel, 1949–1950, pp. 216–219).

**Vanier and a comment on Marcel**

Marcel’s analysis of the state of the world seemed to have resonance with Vanier. Vanier identified the "two worlds of "normal" people who seek social status and are motivated by ambitions of efficiency and riches, and the "abnormal" world of the despised, the handicapped, the "not-adapted-ones"" (Vanier, 1971, Preface), and in one sense the "abnormal world" was the world of the other. Moreover, Vanier recognized that the image of the "ideal human" as powerful "disenfranchises" the less-abled (Vanier, 1998, p. 45). Vanier explained that "abnormal" people appeared to be "failures in the light of reason and responsibility" (Vanier, 1971, p. 41) and they found it difficult finding a place in society (Vanier, 1998, p. 45). Certainly, Vanier thought that everyone should be included in society. However, rather than attempt to help people to adapt to the "normal world" Vanier, like Marcel saw the motivations of this world as problematic. Instead, and perhaps answering Marcel’s "formidable problem", Vanier passionately argued that people with intellectual disabilities challenged the premises of this "normal world" and, in living full and flourishing lives in community with others, could offer hope to us all.

Living life fully and in communion with others involved many of the themes that Marcel identified. In common with Marcel, Vanier thought that individualism and materialism created difficulties, whereas community led to openness and acceptance of others (Vanier, 1989, p. 8). As Vanier (1989) explained, "a community is a sign that love is possible in a materialistic world" (p. 310). According to Vanier, the question of poverty was a hard one. Vanier accepted that many of the things that people had made life easier. However, he also recognized that some material things did destroy some community activities (Vanier, 1989, p. 304), and in this sense, like Marcel, he found that possessions sometimes got in the way of relationships.

Perhaps echoing Marcel’s language, Vanier did not think that people or their wounds and vulnerabilities were "problems". Rather they were part of the mystery of our humanity and could become "a place of meeting" with God and with our brothers and sisters (Vanier, 1989, pp. 28–29). Like Marcel, Vanier recognized that there were psychological barriers that could create a protective shell around people, and that "mutual distrust" and "fear of others" were the main barriers to fraternity. Once these barriers were dissolved by inclusion, respect, and being open and available to others, feelings of "brotherhood/sisterhood" began to emerge (Vanier, 1998, p. 82). Of course through his experience of the assistants in L'Arche Vanier understood, as did Marcel, that sometimes people mistook indispensability for being authentically available to others and so at times people ended up dominating others (Vanier, 1989, p. 244). To address this, again, like Marcel Vanier saw availability as something that people grew into, though Vanier emphasized the need for the help of others, and of course God (Vanier, 1989, pp. 23, 38). Vanier too used the metaphor of a journey to describe the process of growth to becoming truly human, and on this journey it was crucial to "include the weak, the needy, and the different, for they have a secret power that opens up people’s hearts" (Vanier, 1998, pp. 162–163).

Like Marcel, Vanier appreciated that there was an element of risk in any relationship. However, Vanier did not think that risk only concerned the temptation to dominate the other. Perhaps in more of an echo of Levinas and resistance to the other as a threat, Vanier thought that the self discovered in the other a "free person" so "a dangerous person. He is dangerous to me because, in the end, I can never know him completely. He may hurt me. There is a mystery in him – the mystery of his liberty" (Vanier, 1971, pp. 24–26).

Nevertheless, Marcel’s emphasis on availability in fraternity rather than equality as the grounding for human dignity works well in situations where there might seem to be significant inequalities in terms of abilities or incapacities. As Vanier noted, healing and a renewed sense of dignity could be fostered in community and once a person with disabilities began to open up and be available to others then often capabilities that had been "latent" were revealed (Vanier, 2007, p. 91). Moreover, by making availability a component of presence Marcel set up the possibility of recognizing the relevance of each person’s experience in the relationship and their availability to the other because presence was shared. As Vanier noted about this reciprocal availability in shared presence, "community is only a community when all its members realize how deeply they need the gifts of others and try to make themselves more transparent and more fruitful in the exercise of their own gift" (Vanier, 1989, p. 264). And for Vanier, presence also meant the presence of God (Vanier, 1989, p. 171).

**Levinas, Marcel, Vanier: the conversation so far**

Levinas spoke of "the ruin of the world", Marcel of "the broken world", but both philosophers saw new beginnings: as Levinas stated, and in reference to the work done by Marcel, "there is an end; but a new wisdom, a new rationality begins, a new notion of spirit" (Levinas, 1998, p. 54). Levinas and Marcel realized that a focus on rationality as acquiring knowledge could not do justice to the other since any attempt to grasp the being of the other would only amount to making the other into an object or reducing the other to the same as me. Instead this new beginning was the awakening to relationship and to love which meant availability to the other: "welcoming the other person as *thou,* that is to say, not empty-handed" (Levinas, 1998, pp. 53–55), being handy to the other (Marcel, 1949–1950, p. 163). For Levinas, this availability came about as a result of absolute responsibility to the call of the other, responsibility before the exercise of freedom in how to respond, where the other remained a stranger. For Marcel, availability was closely associated with presence where there was fraternal communion in the encounter with the other, my neighbor. However, Marcel also accepted that for many people becoming available was difficult and that there were many obstacles that had to be overcome. Vanier offered a possible solution that had been completely overlooked. Certainly, Vanier appreciated the importance of developing in the self an availability to the other. However, and significantly, Vanier moved the focus away from the availability of the self to the availability of the other. Notably, this other was the person with intellectual disabilities who to many people was the epitome of the stranger. This "strange other" lived an often unnoticed availability not of the head but of the heart.

Vanier's description of the natural progression of maturity in children perhaps expresses the trajectory of availability from Levinas to Marcel: "the movement from seeking approval to taking responsibility, to being open to those who are different, implies a shift of consciousness. It is as if a shell is broken and, gradually, the real person is able to emerge" (Vanier, 1998, p. 82). In this development it was important to recognize that we were all unique, we all had "vulnerable hearts", we belonged to "a common humanity", and significantly "each human being, however small or weak, has something to bring to humanity" and had "a role to play". This movement was "a movement of the heart" (Vanier, 1998, pp. 82–83). To picture the development from Levinas and Marcel in Vanier's approach to availability to the other it may be useful to borrow one of Vanier's own images. Vanier spoke of a one-way street where those on top, the powerful, the selves, told those on the bottom, the outsiders, the "strangers" what to do, what to think, and how to be. In place of this one-way street Vanier called for a "two-way street" where people listened to the other, accepted what they had to give, which was "a simpler and more profound understanding of what it means to be truly human" (Vanier, 1998, p. 84).

**Vanier on the forces of love and compassion: availability of the other**

The title of Vanier's last book is telling: *A Cry Is Heard* seems to reflect the call to respond presented by Levinas and it would seem to reflect Vanier's contention that his work in founding L'Arche was a response to the cry of the other, the one with learning disabilities, being available to and welcoming the other as an other. In part, as Vanier acknowledged, this was correct (Vanier, 2010, pp. 19–20). In an echo of the existential anxiety noted by Marcel, Vanier agreed that the "cry of distress" was inherent in the human condition and he accepted that although community life could not comfort this, community could help us to accept it (Vanier, 1989, p. 195). However, and building perhaps on Marcel’s almost throw away comment that there was a "sanctity" in certain people that could reveal to those with an unavailable attitude that this attitude was inauthentic and a distortion of a properly human way of being (Marcel, 1949, pp. 70–71), Vanier took the philosophy of alterity to another level. Vanier came to realize that this cry of the other was also his own cry, a cry for freedom revealed when he responded to the cry of the other (Vanier, 2018, p. 50). Vanier had a certain humility about his philosophical approach. He explained that it took quite a while to work this out because he wrote as a philosopher with experience of living with disabled people (Vanier, 1971, p. 39). In fact, this experience of disability was absolutely foundational for Vanier's philosophy. Moreover, the "others" with learning disabilities were not "poor little things we need to take care of". Rather they were "messengers from God, who bring us closer to Jesus" (Vanier, 2018, p. 50).

Undoubtedly Vanier was aware of the obstacles to an authentic recognition of the other and a willingness to become available to the other. Developing the thought of both Levinas and Marcel that human beings feared limitation and sought to transcend themselves, Vanier agreed that "one of the greatest sufferings of man is to feel imprisoned, limited. Man is constantly seeking to break through the limits of his being; he refuses to be closed in". However, Vanier perceptively added "still deeper, there is a thirst in the heart of man, a deep yearning *to be understood,* to be loved and to love" (Vanier, 1971, p. 22). In identifying this deep thirst for love Vanier moved beyond both Levinas and Marcel and their sense of the self as an ego who sought only to dominate. Certainly, Vanier recognized the human tendency to grasp power and to dominate and he was all too aware of a world of "false values", "egoism, indifference and a search for material things" that led people to build up barriers (Vanier, 1993, pp. xiii–xiv). However, he saw the results of this tendency, the hate, anger and anguish, as "monsters" which "are protecting our vulnerability and are our cry for and our fear of love. In each one of us is a deep wound, an urgent cry to be held, appreciated and seen as unique and valuable" (Vanier, 1989, pp. 26–27). According to Vanier, this "deep vulnerability of the heart" meant that people who had never received love or experienced true relationships, and instead experienced rejection, tended to believe, with Sartre, "hell is others". But, if these "thirsts" for love and understanding were quenched "others are no longer hell but paradise. With them he can establish a mysterious communion. While still completely himself, he becomes the other" (Vanier, 1971, p. 27). In part Vanier was influenced by developments in psychology that focused on the need for each person to re-find the child in themselves which was crying because it felt alone (Vanier, 1989, p. 178). In addition, Vanier was taken by the philosopher psychologist Viktor Frankl’s "fascinating" and "earth-shattering" book, *Man’s Search For Meaning* and Frankl’s message that "the salvation of man is through love and in love" (Vanier, 1971, p. 28). However more significantly Vanier acknowledged his lived experience with people with disabilities: "they have taught me more about the gospel and even about human relations than all of the great psychological and philosophical concepts; or rather they have allowed me to catch a glimpse of what should be true theology, true philosophy and true psychology" (Vanier, 1971, p. 46).

Notably, Vanier did not make a distinction between people with and without disabilities in terms of vulnerability of the heart. According to Vanier, people who despise those with disabilities, assistants in L'Arche who were "caught up in power struggles", and people with disabilities who do not want to be loved or appreciated, could all be closed in on themselves. The task for each one of us was "to help wounded people grow" (Vanier, 1993, p. xvi). Nevertheless, Vanier remained convinced that people with disabilities "as "different" as they may be", as "other" as they might be, "have a secret power to touch and open other people’s hearts". The lived experience of L'Arche then allowed deep reflection on what it was to be human and what was human fulfillment (Vanier, 2005b, pp. 28–29).

Certainly both Levinas and Marcel were wary of discussing what it was to be human, though for different reasons: Levinas out of concern for an over emphasis on ontology and reducing the other to the same, Marcel because primary reflection on definitions and analysis was abstract in contrast to secondary reflection that involved concrete situations and so was the proper area for philosophy. However, in this reflection on what it was to be human Vanier was not far from heeding the concerns of the two other philosophers. Vanier thought that uniqueness and diversity among human beings were "vital" (Vanier, 2016, p. 37) and his philosophical approach was undoubtedly founded in his experience with people.

Levinas’s critique that Marcel (and Buber) characterized the relation with the other, the I-Thou relation, in terms of being, because "between" and "presence" were modes of being (Levinas, 1987, p. 15) could equally be applied to Vanier. Nevertheless, Levinas also acknowledged that Marcel’s talk of "being" was not always strictly "consciousness of self" but was "relation with the other than self and awakening" (Levinas, 1998, p. 54). Having said that, the absolute alterity of the other proposed by Levinas was forcefully challenged by Vanier precisely because it was the other who revealed the complex realities of the self in their shared vulnerability and it was the other who had the gift "for bringing people together, inviting us on a journey of human transformation" (Vanier, 2016, p. 135).

In words reminiscent of Marcel’s presence, Vanier spoke about people in general being "locked in our own separate worlds". Instead Vanier called for us to "live in reality". Being "more open to reality" was to participate in something mysterious because it was shared and so beyond us as individuals (Vanier, 2016, pp. 34–35). Vanier's experience with people who were different and who lived in structures of reality of "a very subtle nature" (Vanier, 2016, p. 36) allowed him to reflect further than Marcel on the mystery of presence. He described being present with "complex" people as being "continuously surprised and opened up to the mystery" of their being and "therefore to our shared reality" (Vanier, 2016, p. 37).

In being present to the other Vanier realized that the skill of listening was key. Marcel had already identified the non-available listener, the person who appeared to be engaged in communication but was in fact not really open and available to the other. Vanier was well aware of the need to be attentive to different forms of communication (Vanier, 1989, p. 188), and of failures to recognize non-verbal communication as communication and so failing to see the other in their availability. Vanier also drew attention to the importance of listening to one another’s stories in order to help form a shared life and be "one little candle in a dark night" that could bring hope (Vanier, 2003, pp. 76, 82). Going more deeply into listening as an aspect of availability, Vanier spoke about listening as being "opened up still further to the complexity of reality, to overcome divisions, to identify walls and break them down", listening was "about understanding the need behind the communication. It implies greater purpose, greater attentiveness, and presence" (Vanier, 2016, p. 39). Moreover, Vanier recognized that in L'Arche communities in particular, and wherever there was pain, suffering, or illness, there was a need for compassion shaped by competence and genuine presence where presence embraced learning to be with and remaining close to those in need (Vanier, 2010b, p. 101). Of course, in order to be compassionate towards others, the person needed to be compassionate towards him or herself (Vanier, 2010b, p. 64)

Vanier called this way of being that is more than listening as *bienveillance,* "a way of welcoming and being with the other" (Vanier, 2016, p. 40). This way of being went beyond the availability of responsibility or presence as being on hand for the other or even as attentiveness to the other. *Bienveillance* as an aspect of availability was "a way of being that says, "I am happy that we are together"" (Vanier, 2016, p. 40). In the French translation of *Made for Happiness* Vanier spoke about *bienveillance* in terms of "good will" and the attitude towards the other whereby the person saw "something precious" in the other. *Bienveillance* was thus an "inner attitude of our affectivity, or heart, which disposes us to friendship" (Vanier, 2001, pp. 56–59). Indeed, for Vanier some of the most precious moments of *bienveillance* occurred when the people to whom he thought he was ministering were in fact ministering to him, and often without words (Vanier in Merone, n.d). Vanier seemed to echo Marcel’s notion of availability as "incoherence", making room for the other in myself, when he spoke about welcome as giving space to someone "in one’s heart … where the person knows that he or she is accepted just as they are, with their wounds and their gifts" (Vanier, 1989, p. 265). For Vanier, availability was founded in love: "love is the highest and the most profound mystery of the universe, the source and end of all things, but it implies force of character, inner fidelity, intelligence, delicacy of heart and above all the capacity to listen, to accept, and to place oneself at the disposition of the other" (Vanier, 1971, p. 12).

Given this list of what love for availability implied it might seem odd that Vanier chose people with intellectual disabilities, those who were "weak" in the world’s eyes, as the true assistants to the other, the self. It is important to note that Vanier did not romanticize the lives and gifts of people with disabilities, and he often spoke of the human difficulties that the people he lived with had to overcome, difficulties often caused by experiences of rejection, neglect, frustration, or misunderstanding. Indeed, Vanier recognized that L'Arche was not "utopia" and that people with intellectual disabilities could be "quite self-centered" and that the community had to help them in their struggle against what kept them "closed in on themselves", and help them be more open to others (Vanier, 2013, pp. 41, 45–46). Nevertheless, through his work with L'Arche, Vanier came to realize that people with intellectual disabilities had "a mysterious power to break down the inner barriers that prevent us from being open to people". This was because they "are often endowed with simple, loving, and trusting hearts. They show a path to love rather than power" (Vanier, 2003, p. 71). As Vanier explained people with disabilities "live essentially by their hearts" (Vanier, 1998, p. 63).

Vanier said that he only really found out about the common human experience of existential anxiety and loneliness in L'Arche when he encountered people who had suffered acute loneliness. Vanier realized that apparently strong and independent people were able to submerge feelings of loneliness by the masks of busy-ness and seeking recognition and success (Vanier, 1998, pp. 5–12). This masking was also an indication of the self being unavailable to the other. Vanier spoke of people who hid "behind a wall of timidity, hardness, and of a certain hypocrisy and quest for social esteem. They are almost afraid to show themselves as they are" (Vanier, 1971, p. 46). Moreover, "the powerful" saw the heart as a "place of weakness" and so either they feared it or took advantage of it (Vanier, 1998, pp. 46, 78). In contrast, Vanier described people who lived by the heart as having "no choice": the "reality of their life" was "to have open, spontaneous hearts", to be "poor in spirit", "humble and gentle", to weep because they knew pain and suffering in themselves and others (Vanier, 2013, p. 41). They are therefore more inclined to seek personal relationship and connection, where the "opening of the heart implies vulnerability and the offering of our needs and weaknesses" (Vanier, 1998, p. 63). Significant here was that this availability entailed vulnerability, risk, and the possibility of rejection. Like Levinas and Marcel, Vanier said that we could choose how to respond to this "fundamental cry for friendship". However, for Vanier the option was not simply taking up the responsibility that we already had for the other or being present to the other. According to Vanier, "we can either hide our vulnerability behind a strong, protective ego, or else we can discover that our vulnerability is a source of communion and unity" (Vanier, 2010, p. 21). In this mutual vulnerability the heart could not heal itself, it needed others (Vanier, 2007, p. 26).

The other, the person with intellectual disabilities, was one who was not only available but, in that availability, could also accompany on this vulnerable journey of growth. According to Vanier, "accompaniment" was always necessary for everyone at all stages of life since the one who accompanied "is not there to judge us or to tell us what to do, but to reveal what is most beautiful and valuable in us, as well as to point towards the meaning of our inner pain" (Vanier, 1998, p. 129). The other who accompanied the person helped the person "to come to life, to live more fully" and, Vanier added the "accompanier receives life also and as people open up to each other, a communion of heart opens up between them" (Vanier, 1998, pp. 129–130).

Vanier spoke often of Pauline. Vanier knew Pauline as a core memberin L'Arche Trosly. Those like Pauline could show great tenderness, empathy, acceptance, and presence. In L'Arche Vanier found a home, a "place of relationships" and "a heartfelt sense of well being because they loved me and I loved them" (Merone, n.d.). In reflecting on this great gift of availability of the other, Vanier took inspiration from St Thérèse of Lisieux: people who were not chosen, who were not loved, not being waited for, not touched, and who did not belong had hearts that were empty. Empty hearts were available hearts, ready to be filled by God (Vanier, 1989, p. 68). Not only did members of L'Arche live and grow "in the spirit of the Gospel and the Beatitudes" (Vanier, 1989, p. 150), Vanier believed that people with intellectual disabilities were actually living the Beatitudes "at a much deeper level" (Vanier in Coppen, 2002). Vanier saw in the marginalized, the little and the weak, the source of his life and communion because God was there: "they open hardened hearts", and "teach us how to live the Gospel" (Vanier, 1989, p. 96).

**Concluding thoughts**

In the conversation between Vanier, Levinas, and Marcel the one-way street of availability and openness to the other has become a two-way street. In varying degrees, all three philosophers realized the way in which people could be closed in on themselves and unavailable to others. The answer for all three was to "grow in openness towards others" (Vanier, 1989, p. 6). However, for Vanier, availability and attentiveness to the other was not simply a question of the self becoming available to the other. Rather, for Vanier the apparently strange "other" had a significant part to play in helping to transform the other. Certainly, there was some development in understandings of availability from Levinas and Marcel through to Vanier. However, it might be better to view this development as complementarity, after all, no one account could tell the whole story of the mystery of becoming more human through availability to the other. This complementarity and development were possible because Vanier reflected on his unique experience of sharing his life with people who shook others out of their "cozy certitudes" by their very different perspectives on living and thereby opened him up better to appreciate our deeper reality as human beings (Vanier, 2016, p. 37). Levinas and Marcel opened up a new approach in philosophy by their focus on the other and on concrete experience: as Vanier explained, "philosophy, anthropology, theology, and those sciences that tell us what it means to be human can be dangerous if they become ideologies that dictate reality; instead they need to be understood as the means by which we humbly listen to and marvel at reality" (Vanier, 1998, p. 16). A part of reality is to appreciate that alongside the rational there is mystery and the way of the heart, and these lead "to understand each other and what it means to be human, to understand what is happening in the world" (Vanier, 1998, p. 16). Then, "it is only as we begin to integrate such a sense of reality more fully into our being, as we thirst for that which gives meaning to our lives, that we discover the fundamental meaning of loneliness: a cry, often a painful cry of anguish, for more respect and love of others, to be even more enfolded in truth, held in God. Such a cry could bring a new wholeness to humanity" (Vanier, 1998, pp. 16-17). This wholeness is found in the "antidote to loneliness", community, where the "two opposing impulses" of the "drive to belong" and "to walk alone" need to be balanced (Vanier, 1998, pp. 16–19). Deepening understandings of availability of the self to the other and the other to the self seems to be a step in the right direction.

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