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## Being universitas: community and being present in times of pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

This paper considers what is at stake in the idea of universitas – a community of masters and scholars – in the context of the shifting landscape of higher education engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, we consider what it means to be together in a university community. We draw a distinction between the idea of ‘functioning’ as universitas and ‘being’ universitas, arguing that, that while universities have continued to function effectively through the pandemic, something of what it means to be universitas has been lost. We explore, through Marcel’s concepts of disponibilité and indisponibilité (availability and unavailability), presence and communion, what is at stake in our being with others, and participating in their plenitude. We conclude that being bodily present to each other opens up possibilities for realising something of what it means to be universitas as a community of masters, scholars and students.

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### Introduction: the idea of a university

It was in the 14th century that universities, established for the study of the Arts, Medicine Law and Theology, were first referred to as *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, denoting a community of masters and scholars (Heald 1975).<sup>1</sup> Central to *universitas* was a community of teachers and scholars afforded recognition either by a civil or ecclesiastical authority (Rüegg 1992). In highlighting the significance of community to the medieval understanding of universitas, Jacques Verger writes ‘The medieval universities were therefore, first of all, organised communities of individuals ... This notion of the community would seem to be fundamental to the definition of the medieval university’ (1992, 38). The *universitas* was, as Schwinges puts it, a “‘societal community”.’ ‘It was,’ he claims, ‘the faithful reflection of its surrounding society, living like the latter’ (1992, 203).

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The idea of the ‘university-as-community’ remains strong in contemporary higher education, seen especially in university marketing campaigns. Hungary’s Eötvös Loránd University has a motto that translates as ‘The community of knowledge,’ and the European University of St. Petersburg declares *Addo optimus una* – Bringing the best together. The university’s strategic plans, vision, and mission statements all repeatedly signal the importance of community: of studying and living together; of the university at the heart of its community; of the university as a diverse place of belonging and togetherness. University College London’s (UCL) vision is to ‘inspire the community of staff, students and partners,’ and its mission is to be a ‘diverse intellectual *community*’.<sup>2</sup> By putting the notion of community front and centre, universities signal the values they espouse, and the culture they seek to create.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is not only the community of the university that is celebrated in these ways, it is also the idea of the university community within the wider physical community that is at the heart of institutions’ civic engagement plans that celebrate the sharing of spaces and facilities with communities, and which promise positive social impact.<sup>4</sup>

## Part I: functioning as *universitas*

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, university communities were forced to re-think what it meant to be *universitas*. Campuses closed; the community became a diaspora as students moved from their accommodations on campus; academics re-located to their homes while teaching went online, and learning became an almost solitary activity. But the ways in which *universitas* was re-imagined were concerning, in the main, with keeping the functions of the institutions going. Universities have invested in technology to ensure the continued delivery of high-quality teaching. Emergency regulations were approved to ensure student progression. Assessments were modified for professional and practice-based programmes (la Velle et al. 2020), and universities used virtual simulation technologies to teach and to assess clinical competence (Fung et al. 2021). All this ensured that the main functions of the university continued to operate: admission departments ran virtual open days (Gavin et al. 2020); decision-making in finance, quality assurance and ethics continued uninterrupted; and even academic conferences continued in virtual formats (Donlon 2021). Such measures kept universities functioning to realise their key missions.

This rapid shift elicited a broad range of responses from academic staff, ranging from eagerness to apply these new technologies, to concerns and difficulties with using them (Naylor and Nyanjom 2021). Some expressed concern at the pedagogical implications that ensued:

I am concerned about not seeing my students. I am a very hands on, active teacher, and I was wondering how I could be as effective as I am on-campus ... and just the way

I get people involved . . . students wouldn't get as much out of the unit as on-campus (ibid., 1246).

The more general return to campuses in September 2020 in England<sup>5</sup> elicited some of the same kind of positive responses that the population generally felt when restrictions were lifted, and families, friends and communities were able to meet together again:

I want to be back in the classroom. I miss the serendipity of snatched conversations in the interstices of lectures and seminars. I miss people-watching – seeing new students literally and metaphorically navigate campus. I even miss the abysmal coffee in mandatory meetings. I want those rectangles to burst open into the messy, complicated, exciting physical spaces we used to inhabit. I want to be back in the classroom. But I also want to know that it's safe to be there (Rees et al. 2021, no page).

Rees calls particular attention to the physical aspects of the working environment – the bodily and sensory experience of being together that informs and creates a sense of what constitutes an academic community. But this is far from a romantic account. We acknowledge that for some people physical presence is equated with toxicity in the workplace; but against this, humans are social beings, and in many cultures physical separation from human others (such as being in exile or solitary confinement) is one of the most significant and profoundly disturbing forms of punishment. Wickenden (in Rees et al. 2021) captures something of the essence of what was lost when the community that is *universitas* was profoundly disrupted:

Academia, despite its reputation, is a social beast. It thrives off solidarity, brief chats in the department kitchen, bouncing your research off a friend in another department. It is worth it for those moments you see students get the point you're making, or when the conversation of a break-out group sparks connections they wouldn't have made on their own (Rees et al. 2021, no page).

But such views stand in stark contrast to those of others, with some asserting that they could function effectively, fulfilling their job roles, without being physically present on campus (UCL – University College London 2021). Of course, the picture was a complex and nuanced one. The pandemic necessitated balancing childcare responsibilities and home-schooling with the demands of work. Conditions for home working required appropriate physical space; the ability to cover additional utility costs; and access to the internet and to appropriate electronic devices. Concerns about the safety of a return were found amongst staff in the United Kingdom through a poll by *Times Higher Education*, which found that a majority of university staff felt unsafe going back to campus for in-person teaching (McKie 2021). There were repeated fears about the performativity that might be playing a role in the decision to return to campuses, as evidenced in the claim that a return to physical presence on campuses was 'driven by the optics . . . rather than by the lived experience

and concerns of the staff' (McKie 2021, no page) and that "Back to normal" has been embraced at all costs to justify the high student fees' (McKie 2021, no page). Talk of online versus 'back to normal' suggests a dichotomy between online and in-person modes of the university. However, we acknowledge that spaces are created by those who inhabit them rather than entered into abstractly. What follows from this is that when we advocate the importance of physicality, it is as a means to build community and meaning rather than simply as an end in itself. These concerns about online or in-person, physical presence raise an important question: Is there a problem here? Surely, there are benefits both to the institution (in terms of the job still being done) and the academic (achieving a better work–life balance and job satisfaction) if universities embrace these new technical ways of working? This then opens onto a second question: Would such arrangements constitute *universitas*?

In this article, we argue that the dispersed community, where for the majority of the time academics and students are not physically together as a community of masters and scholars, shifts what it means to be *universitas*. We suggest that while such arrangements may maintain the main functions of the university operating effectively, that something significant is lost. It is as if, in Lesley Gourlay's words, there has been a shift to 'performing the university' (2020, 791). As Gourlay writes 'The ontological nature of the university itself has been fundamentally altered by the closure of the campus and lockdown . . . the site of the university is now radically dispersed across sequestered bodies' (2020, 991).

In turning to the work of the French existentialist philosopher and playwright, Gabriel Marcel, we explore what we see as a key distinction: functioning as *universitas* versus being *universitas*. In this article, we draw on Marcellian ideas to argue that, during the pandemic, the university increasingly became an amalgamation of the functions it performed; by focussing on the resolution of immediate problems, it was able to keep all its main functions operating efficiently and effectively. This was despite the forced transition to working, and learning, apart from fellow students and colleagues, and our physical separation from each other. We then move to contrast this with what is at stake in *being universitas*, arguing that part of this is realised by our physical presence to each other in a community of masters and scholars. Marcel is not a philosopher of education and yet is important to our discussion has here given his concern in his (1948) work *The Philosophy of Existentialism* with the 'misplacement of the idea of function' ([1948] 1995, 11), and the effect of this on our relationships in what he calls a 'broken world' (1950, 18).

To illustrate this valorisation of function, Marcel uses the example of a subway token operator. In a busy subway environment, the public engages her in only the most superficial way, avoiding speaking or making eye contact, interacting only to ensure that they are given the correct change and ticket. The operator is simply the amalgamation of the function that she performs. Marcel summarises the problem when he writes 'Man is thought of on the model of

a machine, on the model of a mere physical object – since in fact he is being treated as if he were a mere physical object’ ([1952] 2008, 71). Marcel elaborates on this idea further in *The Mystery of Being* (1950), claiming that what is going on in the subway token operator example is ‘the reduction of [her] personality to an official identity’; what has been effected is a kind of ‘social nudity, a social stripping’ (29–30). He writes of such ‘interactions’ as characteristic of what he calls the ‘administrative machine’ (ibid., 31). In those instances when an individual (or indeed, a university), is seen merely as an amalgamation of the functions that she performs, Marcel claims that ‘The ties of fraternity are snapped – and there is nothing that can take their place except a Nietzschean “resentment” or, at very best, some working social agreement strictly subordinated to definite materialistic purposes’ (Marcel 1950, 32).

But there is a further important point that Marcel raises; for him, functionalism of the broken world is bound up with its obsession with what he calls ‘technics,’ our deferral to the technological to resolve problems. Here again, we see a connection with contemporary universities’ mode of operation during pandemic times, relying on the salvatory power of technology to facilitate operations. For Marcel, dependency on ‘gadgets’ and technology risks us becoming estranged from an awareness of our inner reality.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, one’s ‘centre’ moves from the internal to the external as one aligns with technologies outside of the self. As Marcel writes:

I should be tempted to say that the centre of gravity of such a man and his balancing point tend to become external to himself: that he projects himself more and more into objects, into the various pieces of apparatus that he depends for his existence’  
 ([1952] 2008, 41).

For Marcel, ‘technics’ cannot resolve the existential questions that are iteratively part of our human condition. We go further and argue that such questions are at the heart of what it means to be *universitas*, to live together well as a community of masters and scholars. One effect of merely functioning as *universitas* is the deleterious effect on our relation to others. To illustrate this point, and drawing on his contemporary, Martin Buber’s famous I-It/I-Thou distinction (Buber [1923] 2013), Marcel writes ‘If I treat a “Thou” as a “He,” I reduce the other to being only nature; an animated object which works in some ways and not in others’ (Marcel 1949, 106–107). Our being in relation to another as a ‘He’ prioritises attention on the resolution of problems (as opposed to the exploration of mysteries); as Marcel notes: ‘A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce’ (Marcel 1949, 117). In what follows, we now turn away from the resolution of problems in the functioning university, to consider what it means to live and work together in a community of masters and scholars – to be *universitas*.

## Part II: being *universitas*

Marcel claims that despite our living in what he calls an increasingly ‘collectivized world,’ paradoxically, ‘the idea of being in relation to others in any real community becomes more and more inconceivable’ (Marcel 1950, 27). Togetherness, he argues, is losing its meaning such that there is a deleterious effect on our human relationships.<sup>7</sup>

In *Creative Fidelity* (Marcel [1964] 2002), Marcel writes of the relationship between a lack of togetherness (physical or metaphorical) and the way in which we perceive another: ‘When I consider another individual as him, I treat him as essentially absent; it is his absence which allows me to objectify him’ (32). The ‘socialization’ of life in the broken world now consists for Marcel in an individual ‘being treated more and more as an agent, whose behaviour ought to contribute towards the progress of a certain social whole, a something rather distant, rather oppressive, let us say . . . rather tyrannical’ (Marcel 1950, 28). Such effects are undoubtedly seen in our institutions, and in the context of higher education, this raises critical questions which go to the heart of what it is to be a university. Does being *universitas* necessitate our expressing what it means to be a community of masters and scholars in ways that privilege physical presence through forms of togetherness? And is it in our being with one another (in ways that go beyond being present in an online teaching session, meeting, or research seminar) that we articulate something of what it means to be *universitas*; accomplish more than keeping its functions going and move beyond relating to others as agents to solve problems? In the remainder of this paper, we turn to see how thinking about the community at the heart of the university, an idea that underpins these kinds of questions, is enriched through attention to Marcel’s ideas of availability, communion, presence and plenitude.

The importance of physical togetherness to our ideas of what it means to be, and flourish, as humans<sup>8</sup> – and the loss of this during the pandemic because of legislated social and physical distancing – has been profound. There were moving, and deeply troubling accounts of elderly residents in care settings separated from family and caregivers with devastating consequences (Paananen et al. 2021); of the effects on babies’ social and communication skills of being born during the pandemic (Wise 2022), and the achingly sad stories of COVID patients dying alone in hospital (Hernández-Fernández and Meneses-Falcón 2021), all of which underscore our need for togetherness. But the specificity of such loss is ineffable; we struggle to articulate what it is exactly that is different when we are not together, often concluding by resigning ourselves to merely stating that ‘it is just not the same.’

It is at this point that Marcel’s oeuvre, with its evocative and rich metaphors for our living together and being in relationship with one another, may help us to begin to express what it is that has been lost, and so, what certain forms of human relationship afford. Central to Marcel’s philosophy (as well as to his

dramatic works) is an idea of the self as being receptive to others, and a commitment to participation<sup>9</sup> that is rooted in ideas of encountering others, and of being encountered ourselves. We now move on to explore some of the specific Marcellian concepts and metaphors that he uses in articulating his notion of participation.

### ***Availability, communion, and presence***

As with his contemporary, Martin Buber, Marcel emphasises two general ways in which we conduct ourselves in relation to others: *disponibilité* and *indisponibilité* - generally translated as 'availability' and 'unavailability' (Marcel 1962, 23).<sup>10</sup> To be available is not a temporal issue - of making time in one's schedule to, say, to see students who call by the office. It is rather understood in a richer sense: as a general state of, and commitment, to making one's material, spiritual, emotional and intellectual resources available to others that is marked by love, hope, and fidelity. For Marcel, the communion we experience with others through availability limits the objectification of beings. However, to be unavailable, claims Marcel, is to cut oneself off from the possibility of communion with others - to be alienated (Marcel [1964] 2002). The idea is to see others in purely functional terms (as with the subway token operator) rather than *qua* beings to be encountered. Such a lack of communion positions the other as 'He' rather than as 'Thou.'

Marcel uses the image of a circle around ourselves into which we place the other as 'He,' in order to illustrate the problem of the 'fragmented' or 'parceled out' other (Marcel [1964] 2002, 72). This stands in opposition to his ideas of porosity or permeability, in which we are radically hospitable the other as 'Thou'; he writes: 'If we devote our attention to the act of hospitality, we will see at once that to receive is not to fill up a void with an alien presence, but to make the other person participate in a certain plenitude' (ibid., 28). Being available does not insist on its own rights, and our availability risks being rebuffed by the other who remains unavailable. Marcel anticipates reciprocity in the intersubjective relationship, without this being demanded. 'What is relevant' he writes, 'is the act by which I expose myself to the other person instead of protecting myself from him, which makes him penetrable for me at the same time as I become penetrable for him' (Marcel [1964] 2002, 36). It is in these moments of porosity and of mutual encounter that Marcel claims we are *avec* - or with - another. This should not be understood merely in either temporal or prepositional terms; rather, *avec* denotes a relationship of genuine communion and *co-esse*.

The Marcellian concepts of communion and availability coalesce with the idea of presence. Yet again, we do not understand the richness of this notion in everyday ideas of 'here-ness.' Rather, availability and communion allow us to participate fully in the being of another, and so to be present to them as 'Thou.' Conversely, when we comport ourselves towards another as a 'Him,' we



ourselves are closed off to the presence that the other offers to us. Maintaining presence to another over time requires a fidelity that is creative in order to meet the demands of such presence.

### ***Presence and being present***

A further example of how Marcel articulates what it means to participate in the life of another is in how he expresses what it means to be 'present' (Marcel [1964] 2002). The concept of presence is ineluctably tied to Marcel's understanding of the way in which we relate to others. However, this usage implies something richer than mere physical, bodily presence. Marcel writes 'Of course presence is not to be construed here as externally manifesting oneself to the other, but rather as involving a quality which cannot be so easily described in objective terms, of making me feel that he is *with me*' (Marcel [1964] 2002, 154). Marcellian intersubjective relationships are marked by an encounter that demands the understanding of the other at a level that goes beyond the acknowledgement of the physical presence of the other. A significant component of such relationships can be understood through the lens of the way that Marcel claims that we relate to music. As Bernard Murchland, writing on Marcel's philosophy, states:

If music is the most perfect medium to reveal man to himself in unique plenitude and liberty it is because, Marcel believes, it touches that point of breakthrough where man communes with the "essence" of others, when he is interiorly united with all those who participate in the enigmatic human adventure (Murchland 1959, 344).

In more practical terms, these moments of shared understanding can occur in a variety of ways. It is not that our intersubjective relationships need to be characterised by passionate speeches, showy displays of emotion, or even explicit discussion of our inward lives, but rather that they can be realised in many seemingly insignificant moments such as when we use a tone of voice, or issue a slight smile that might accompany a phrase we use; all these exemplify our *co-esse* (Marcel 1950). However, Marcel recognises that our being together physically is not enough to experience this kind of encounter; we can, for example, be on a bus, or at a party, and experience intense isolation despite our physical proximity to others. He writes 'However, there is a presence which is yet a mode of absence' (Marcel [1964] 2002, 33).

Yet there *is* something profoundly foundational to the human condition about togetherness that is bound up with the physical. It is of note that, despite Marcel emphasising that one can be both physically present yet absent, many of the examples he gives of 'presence' rely on some form of physical interaction, and this is especially tangible in his dramatic works.<sup>11</sup> The significance of this is seen in Marcel's claim that 'To encounter someone is not merely to cross his path, but to be, for the moment at least, near to or *with* him ... it means a co-

presence' (Marcel [1964] 2002, 12 authors' emphasis). Marcel's ideas, then, on our reading, have profound implications for our personal intersubjective relationships; first for the forms of pedagogical relationships – marked by ways of being together – that we forge and sustain in our institutions during times of pandemic; and second, for the communal at the very heart of what it means to be *universitas*. It is to these ideas that we now turn.

### **Part III: pedagogical forms in times of pandemic**

In considering what it means to 'be *universitas*' we now draw attention to two important aspects: the communal and the pedagogical. Both of these have been brought into sharper focus as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, where what it means to be together, and what it means to teach and learn in this context has radically shifted.

#### ***Being together as a pedagogical form***

Our argument to this point has made the conception of 'being together' central. This, we suggest, may be taken to indicate a physical togetherness. However, in the context of the university, a criticism could be levelled along the lines that our argument might suggest that those institutions which operate predominantly online are only *functioning as universitas*, and that to *be universitas*, there need to be forms of physical presence that then open up the possibilities for presence, communion, and expressions of availability. Let us address this issue directly using the examples of the Open University and Arden University in England, and Athabasca University in Canada, all of which market themselves primarily as online or distance learning providers of higher education. We are not saying that these, and other similar, universities are incapable of forming meaningful academic communities, nor that these institutions represent a deficit model of higher education. Indeed, Marcel is at pains to point out that a loved one who is many thousands of miles distant from us, may be 'closer' to us than somebody who is in our immediate vicinity. It is rather that there are specific and noteworthy difficulties – such as belonging, identity and community cohesion – that such institutions do encounter, and which has been brought into sharp focus with the shift to online learning during the pandemic (Banas and Wartalski, 2019; Shea et al. 2019). It is telling that these kinds of universities will often emphasise the limited physical components of their courses whilst valorising the affordances of online and distance learning.<sup>12</sup> In conceiving of community in Marcellian terms, we look beyond the overly simplistic dichotomy of a university operating in-person or online, to emphasise instead a mode of *being universitas* that privileges a richer conception of what it means to participate in the life of another, and how physical presence might open up possibilities for such participation.

### ***Relationship as a pedagogical form***

The idea of being *universitas* in pandemic times has significant implications for thinking about pedagogy and pedagogical relationships. We understand a pedagogical relationship very simply: first as one that arises in the context of teaching and learning in the university; second that the relationship is pedagogical in that it is educative for both parties in ways that go beyond the learning of mere curricular content.

At the outset of this paper, we highlighted a certain resistance to return to campus following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, with common claims made that the work (of the administrator, the academic) could be undertaken effectively without the need for a physical campus presence.<sup>13</sup> We still maintain that there is something important about the physical presence – as opposed to being ‘present’ in online spaces – which is given a fuller expression in Marcel’s philosophical oeuvre. This is not to say, however, that there have not been important lessons learned from the pandemic in terms of the potential benefits of pedagogical relationships facilitated via online platforms for teaching, learning and the core functions of the university (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis 2021; Chung et al. 2020). We maintain that a pedagogical relationship (whether in times of pandemic or not) is grounded in, and grows from, forms of physical presence.

Marcel writes that on occasions, ‘the subject finds himself in the presence of something entirely beyond his grasp’ (Marcel 1973, 193). We can understand this using Marcel’s idea of participation in another’s plenitude. Marcellian philosophy is, at its heart, a philosophy of participation. While physical presence to another is not something that Marcel insists upon in thinking about what it means to participate in the life of another, his dramatic works in particular show how it is in being bodily present – when we encounter another face to face – that we come to experience the other as fully human, that we experience the human full-blown. When we encounter the other in her bodily presence to us, we experience her in plenitude. This then opens up the possibilities for our giving of ourselves to another from *our* plenitude. The etymological roots of plenitude signal abundance, fullness and completeness.<sup>14</sup> To talk then of the pedagogical relationship as one of the plenitude hints at a relationship one that goes beyond simply the transmission of curricular content, and to a role that encompasses something more closely related to that of the ancient pedagogue.<sup>15</sup>

Participation through plenitude moves our attention onto a goal that exists beyond our self; our ‘centre’ is shifted. When working remotely, often alone, it is easy to become self-absorbed, and to lose track of the lived realities and complexities of our colleagues. It is in our being together that we are often exposed to a change of orientation away from ourselves and towards another: ‘This change revolves upon the centre of an experiencing self; or, to speak more

exactly, let us say that the progress of ... [our] thought gradually substitutes one centre for another' (Marcel 1950, 48). This form of de-centring is essentially pedagogical, as, by shifting one's perspectives to align with another, one can more readily engage the lived reality of the other in a way that includes, and goes beyond, the functional operations of the university. This is what marks the pedagogical relationship, and also makes tangible the reality of university mission statements that vaunt ideas of community and shared values. Such decentring is the obligation that we owe to the community if we think of ourselves *as* a community and to those with whom we are in a pedagogical relationship.<sup>16</sup>

A potential criticism of our approach here is that Marcel's works do not have a direct concern with *pedagogical* relations. However, we find his work to be profoundly educative. His analysis of how we might be available to each other and encounter others in a relationship of presence, communion and plenitude, speak to what is central to the idea of being in the community *as universitas*, and being in pedagogical relation. His work articulates an idea of the interpersonal that goes far beyond the (often contractual or transactional) ways in which we tend increasingly to talk of how best to relate to colleagues and students in the university. We read Marcel's work as having a bearing on what the university could be, how we live well together in it, and for providing a framework of language that gives expression to qualities and experiences of what it means to be *universitas* in ways that transcend the overriding contemporary concern with function.

### **Conclusion: participation through plenitude**

In closing, we will now consider the ways in which we might achieve more of what it means to be *universitas* through the idea of participation in the plenitude of another. In doing this, we present an account of hope for the possibilities of *universitas* that resists the focus on maintaining function alone. Marcel's work offers not only a language for critiquing the emphasis on function which has come to dominate the work of universities, and also the relationships within them, but also the most practical of examples for how we might re-imagine our being in relationship to colleagues, students and partners. While it has been difficult to express in concrete terms what is lost when we are not physically together (and this has very much been the case during the pandemic), we might turn to Marcel's philosophical work to recognise some of the specific ways in which the interactions differ, and so what is at stake in our bodily presence to each other in the university. In doing this, we reveal something meaningful about what it is to be *universitas*. We see these differences exemplified in particular in Marcel's dramatic works, where the fact of our being bodily present to each other opens rich possibilities for a relationship that is pedagogical in that we are exposed to, and learn from, each other.

When we are bodily present to each other in the lecture hall, the meeting room, the seminar, corridor or cafeteria, the complexity of the personhood of the other is brought more sharply into focus. We see this illustrated clearly in dialogue from the opening scene of Marcel's (1952) play 'The Funeral Pyre' (*La Chapelle Ardente*). Here, the two characters navigate an understanding of their own relationship. Aline is imploring her would have been daughter-in-law,<sup>17</sup> Mireille, to call her 'Mother.' It is from a place of being together physically that they are finding a way to overcome the complexities of their situation and to resolve what seems like a very basic problem of what to call each other. Similarly, in the context of higher education, online spaces (for teaching, committees, meetings etc.) tend to focus attention on the problem or the task at hand; Marcel might describe this as the foregrounding of the problem. But it is when we are physically in each other's presence that we are sensitive to the complexities of the personhood of others. It is not that this is impossible when we are working from disparate locations, but rather that our bodily presence to each other opens us up to the mystery of (others') being. As Marcel puts it:

It can happen, however, that the bond of feeling is created between me and the other person if, for example, I discover an experience we have both shared (we have both been to a certain place, have run the same risks, have criticized certain individual, or read and loved the same book); hence a unity is established in which the other person and myself become *we*, and this means that he ceases to be *him* becomes *thou* ... The path leading from dialectic to love has now been opened (Marcel [1964] 2002, 33).

In an example from contemporary culture, if we imagine a group of friends meeting in a pub or going to a football match, there is clearly something different about the very fact of their bodily togetherness around a shared pursuit that elevates the experience. Of course, one can drink alone at home, or watch the match by oneself from one's living room, but in doing so, one misses the opportunity to participate in the emotional experiences of others doing the same (of involvement with their joy, pain etc.).

This participation, by virtue of physical togetherness, opens possibilities for the kind of communion and presence of which Marcel writes. To see this in the context of higher education, we argue that, because of our shared embodiment, we are better able to embrace the shared vision that *being universitas* imagines. This is because we see the other – in Buberian terms – as a 'Thou' who exists in a relation of mystery to us, rather than as merely a functionary to solve whatever immediate problem lies before us. In moving beyond a narrow understanding of the other as a functional 'It,' physical presence to each other makes us indubitably aware of the fullness of the other as 'Thou.' The other exists, at this moment, beyond just the scenario in which we encounter them, and opens possibilities for us to experience them in plenitude. Our experience of the other's plenitude, however, is dependent on a generosity that is seen in the

idea of the porosity of the self in terms of a giving to, and a receiving from, the other.

Our hospitality to the other, then, in terms of an openness in relation to all our extant physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual resources, is the practical outworking of Marcel's ideas of availability, communion, presence and plenitude. This, we conclude, is a central characteristic of an institution taking seriously its commitment to being, rather than merely functioning as, *universitas*. It is in these kinds of hospitality to others – that are marked by pedagogical forms of being together and in relationship – that something of what it is to be *universitas* is realised.

## Notes

1. Heald points to a much longer history to the idea of the university, suggesting origins with Aristotle's founding of the Athenian school in 335 BC, and in the establishment in Nalanda in north-eastern India during the fourth and fifth century BC of eight colleges and three libraries attracting students from throughout the Asian world.
2. See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/about/what/vision-a> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/about/what/vision-aims-values> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/about/what/vision-values>.
3. This is shown in an example from Leeds Trinity University, an institution linking its vision to its roots in a Catholic foundation: 'Focused on the innate dignity and value of each person, we seek to provide our students with a distinctively supportive academic and professional community.' See <https://www.leedstrinity.ac.uk/about/mission-vision-values/>.
4. The University of Edinburgh's Community Plan captures this kind of community engagement when it states: 'Our commitment to working in partnership with communities at home and abroad to build programmes of research and education underscores the co-creation ethos of community plan.' See <https://efi.ed.ac.uk/university-new-community-plan-puts-efi-at-the-heart-of-civic-commitment/>.
5. This has happened unevenly, and while some institutions have returned to full face-to-face teaching and meetings, others have adopted a hybrid approach, or are still restricting access to campus for other than the most essential of functions.
6. It seems clear to us that simulating physical relationality is not the same as actual physical relationality. However, a question might be raised as to whether this is an essential difference, or one that is a limit of the current technology. As such, an interesting question is whether more advanced virtual reality technology might alter this situation.
7. We are concerned here with human-human relationships. While we acknowledge the possibility of relationships with the non-human, or indeed with the very idea of the university, such discussions are beyond the scope of this paper.
8. We are not advocating for a particular model of relationship in all cases, recognising aspects of the self (such as neurodiversity) which may alter the ways in which one engages with others.
9. We see participation as active, proactive and reactive, as opposed to a passive state. In this sense, being *universitas* must also imply doing *universitas*.
10. These terms are also sometimes translated as 'disposability'/'indisposability,' or even 'handiness'/'unhandiness'.

11. In Marcel's plays, the physical presence of certain characters affects the ways that others behave. In his (Marcel 1952) 'The Funeral Pyre' (*La Chapelle Ardente*), the father of the family, Octave, is made so uncomfortable by the presence of his wife that he is unable to express himself authentically. Similarly, Octave's wife, Aline, find his presence an overwhelming and unbearable reminder of the loss of their son. In Marcellian terms, they remain radically unavailable to each other, despite their physical proximity in the same room.
12. For example, Arden University provide 6 UK study centres where students meet face-to-face. Athabasca University have 4 pedagogical approaches, one of which is described as 'delivery mode in which the course takes place in a physical classroom setting. Contact with the instructor is face to face' (see: <https://www.athabasca.ca/calendar/undergraduate/general-information/glossary.html#gs>), and the Open University offer face-to-face tutorials, field trip and even residential schools depending on the programme of study.
13. See also the Future of Work Survey conducted by University College, London. [online], available at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/news/2021/may/future-work-survey-what-we-learnt-your-responses>.
14. See: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/plentitude>.
15. Such relationships were marked by care, a concern for growth, and supervision in a holistic sense. See Yannicopoulos (1985).
16. Robert Esposito highlights the etymological roots of 'community' not primarily in terms of a togetherness, but in terms of obligation or debt (cf. the roots of 'community' in the Latin '*munus*' – debt or obligation). See Esposito (2010).
17. Mireille would have been Aline (and her husband, Octave's) daughter-in-law had her fiancé, Raymond, survived the war. However, he was killed in action. See Act 1, scene 1.

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