

Gabriel Marcel on Hope

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Abstract

According to Gabriel Marcel, being cannot be approached directly through a conceptual way, because it belongs to the real territory of mystery rather than that of problem. One of the most important concepts in Marcel's philosophy is that of hope. Marcel's conception of hope relies upon a distinction between "having" and "being." We do not *have* a belief; we are in a belief. Similarly, when we hope, we do not have hope. For Marcel, hope consists in asserting that beyond all data and calculations, at the heart of being, there is a mysterious principle related to me.

Keywords: being, having, hope, mystery, love, loyalty.

Introduction

Gabriel Marcel is a French playwright and philosopher, who is deeply concerned with such concepts as love, loyalty, faith, and hope, without which the tragic nature of human existence cannot be overcome. The “loss of the ontological sense” is an important effect of abstract philosophies, and he thinks that there is an intrinsic sacredness involved in merely being human. The idea of *function* in abstract philosophy takes the place of human dignity and sacredness of existence. This idea eliminates the feeling of love and hope; when the world loses its mysterious aspect, everything is inevitably weighted based on *causation*. Such a world becomes functional, and humans start to forget their sense of wonder. When their human dignity begins to fade away and the world they live in becomes functional, the sense of disappointment starts. Conceptual philosophies are characterized by Marcel as being abstract, and a main property of his thinking is his enthusiasm which challenges the adequacy of the functional spirit and explores human experience.

World War I devastated Marcel’s idealism and led him to a new path in philosophy. He maintained that philosophy could not, by itself, present us with a full account of the universe; philosophy is, like life, a journey. A philosopher must keep thinking about faith and hope as outcomes of human experience: faith in the fact that human is part of a bigger existence beyond that which is evident to him. In his plays, Marcel is concerned with complicated situations his characters face. When the character finds himself away from himself and God, he starts to fade away without achieving a final resolution. Safety is attained through a thinking process called by Marcel “secondary thought.”

In *Being and Having*, Marcel distinguishes between two basic modes of relation with the world: being and having; accordingly, there

are two modes of thought: secondary and primary. Considering the importance of secondary thought in Marcel's view, the concept of hope in his thought shall be discussed.

Being and Having

Before we turn to "hope," we need to have a look into the two sorts of relations that man has with the world. Gabriel Marcel holds that man has two types of existence: "being" and "having," by which man establishes relationship with existence, making fundamental differences in understanding the world. He maintains that having and being are two main requirements of man's relation with the world. Nevertheless, according to Fromm, this having, necessary for living, differs from the having which comes along with motivation. Surviving is a feeling and motivation, which is reasonably normal in life and expands life. In addition, we need to have everything in which we take interest. It seems that being takes its origin from having; that is, everything which has not have cannot be (alive). This is not inherent in humans but is the outcome of social impacts on them. Hence, unlike merely having, having for living has no contradiction with being, and man should seek to have for the purpose of living only (Fromm 1976, 45).

Marcel's distinction between being and having in some cases is obvious and of no importance. However, there are other cases where the distinction between having something and being something is much more significant. For example, when we hope, we do not have hope; we are hope (Treanor 2006, 80). Marcel thinks that man is used to putting these two together and has slightly preferred being over having. In *Being and Having*, he makes a distinction between the two basic ways of relationship with the world: through being and through having. Having or being both refer to a gradation. Man has always used 'having' for referring to part of his behaviors in life; for instance, we think that

we “have” an idea, and this sense of having makes us defend it. Possessory and abstract spirits have ties in some way. Subjectivism is an effort to describe an objective reality in a manner that our mind is able to possess it. If we had to pick a theme which unifies Marcel’s thought, it would be his concern to guard against the spirit of abstraction and his effort to elaborate a concrete philosophy (Keen 1966, 16).

Marcel recognizes having as part of a management or regulatory system or any system that deals with man’s interests. Making laws is simply a surface side, and thus man cannot step beyond it. That which man has is to some extent independent of him and can be separated from him to the degree that he can consider himself a force. That is to say, man is an existence that has power and can only transfer what he has. It is notable that such transference demands paying huge price in life. When you say, “I have,” it means that you did not have and now you have. This is possible only by a transference which may not take place without losing something.

Must examine, more closely than I have done as yet, the nature of the relative dependency of being and having: our possessions swallow us up. The metaphysical roots of the need to preserve. Perhaps this links up with what I have written elsewhere about alienation. The self becomes incorporated in the thing possessed; not only that; but perhaps the self is only there if possession is there too. But the self disappears in the full exercise of an act, of any creation whatever. It only reappears, it seems, when there is a check in creation. (Marcel 1973, 152)

Marcel prompts us to ask questions about the mystery of being. He distinguishes between relations between an “I” and a “he.” To treat another person as a “he” rather than a “thou” is to deal with him as if he were an object. Meeting someone whom we consider a “he” means that our relationship with him is in such a way that he is separate from us. However, when we establish a relationship with someone whom we

considering a “thou,” we do not treat him as an object. It is here that Marcel speaks of the experience of *hope*.

Hope

Marcel interprets hope in a relation to God. Having hope in a superior being that can support us when we are disappointed is hoping "an Absolute Thou." The Absolute Thou, who is a living and present being, is able to save everyone who has hope in Him, because He is present everywhere at every time. Hence, we ought to understand hope and the Absolute Thou, as we have no other solution to get out of disappointment.

Disappointment leads man either to attain his genuine self or to surrender to disappointment. Disappointment is a temptation that discourages man to have a reasonable sight ahead and does everything to persuade him that there is no superior, infinite force to save him. In such circumstances, man begins to feel that disloyalty is engulfing the whole universe. Marcel tries to describe and acquaint us with such matters, which he thinks are crucial for human life. These matters are objective enough that everyone can understand them without demanding proofs.

In Marcel's view, hope has a link with fidelity too. There is a parallel between the structure of fidelity and hope. There are similarities between hope and other concrete approaches. Hope can be regarded as the continuation and expansion of availability. It is indeed what might be called a cosmic openness in the face of the ultimate mystery of being (Keen 1966, 40).

Just as faith is the model of fidelity, unconditional hope in God, the Absolute Thou, reveals the true nature of hope. Even the most limited hope refers to the Absolute Thou, who is the basis for unconditional hope and the all-present and all-living superior being at heart.

As fidelity emerges only where betrayal can happen, hope also can arise where there is the possibility of despair. The temptation to despair is the same as the impulse to limit hope to the sphere of the calculable and possession. Hope leads us to salvation and getting rid of darkness and misery. Hope can rise only where no calculation is made, as nature cannot direct us to hope by itself, because the essence of hope is excellent (Marcel 1995, 28).

Hope refers to a sort of avoidance of calculating, and thus it is so crucial. It seems that hope is accompanied by the assumption that it can leave behind every reality that can be calculated, and that it claims a relationship with a secret principle at the heart of everything or every event, which ridicules such calculations. In this sense, hope is not only a protest that can inspire but also a calling or a request. Only having such an idea can allow us to claim hope. A hopeful person has reached the idea that there is an Absolute Thou, to whom we can get close through our experiences in life and also our perpetual love. Such a Thou never denies His love (Marcel 1995, 29).

It may be said that if I hope a certain thing to happen, such as the healing of my illness or being released from prison, because of my belief in an unseen world, I have stepped into a mysterious, secret world in which nothing can be supported by experiment or proof. Therefore, it seems, I am escaping the reality. The response is that hope differs from expectation. Being hopeful does not mean to look forward to something to happen. Such looking forward comes from expectation, not hope. Just like faith, hope is absolute; we must not lose our hope if our wants or expectations remain unfulfilled. Hope refers to excellence, a force which drives man forward. It is far from being unnecessary and negligible; it is a great need of our soul. It is hope that encourages us to fulfil our wishes and expectations (Marcel 1995, 57).

Marcel thinks that faith and hope are interconnected. Hope is nonsense without faith, and life is worthy when its basis is God. If we accept that life is a blessing, we must accept that man is perpetual and that we step in the Afterworld when we pass away. It is nonsense to think that God's blessing is destroyed and wiped out by death. Therefore, it is crucial to realize that we are perpetual, and thus we must think beyond this material, earthly life.

Faith, as an absolute and unconditional hope caused by nothing, does not fade away. It is beyond reality and can prevent disappointment. Hence, it is essential for life to be regarded as a blessing of God. Faith has its root in "being," in the inherent merit of man's existence. Every human is a perpetual creature, because he is a blessing of God, and this is the basis of hope and faith. Existence, therefore, is *human* existence, and hope and faith are not means to let man escape reality; rather, they help him discover his existence.

There is a pleasurable confidence in faith and a foundational experience, which assures us that life is a blessing of God and hope is part of it. Simply put, hope is at the heart of existence and beyond calculation. It is a secret that makes us get into our deep self (Marcel 1995, 67).

Being confident in God's blessing is absolute hope. An absolute hope, as man's response to his infinite existence, signifies that he is greatly indebted to it. We can get rid of despair when we see ourselves as weak beings before God's absolute power.

Despair is a form of betrayal, which arises from a feeling that God has ceased to help us while God never does that and rather has planned that we continue our lives after death. We have been given a sense of passion to live in order to experience the perpetual and inherent value. In despair, man relies on himself thinking that there is no arrangement

prior to his action and that everything depends upon his action. But hope is to refrain from material calculations and expectations. Like loyalty and love, faith is common in people. In spite of inevitable miseries and sufferings, life continues to be a meaningful blessing, to which death can by no means put an end. Those who feel hope can understand by their everyday experience that life is a gift with which God has blessed them—a reality that is never felt by disbelievers (Anderson 2006, 174).

Marcel thinks that a philosophers' central duty is to deliberate on spiritual concepts: they must explain hope and despair to ensure people that they are immune to despair, as it is up to man to choose loneliness or participation. Hope arises at the very border of such loneliness and participation. Accepting that man is merely dependent on himself is destining him to lead a hopeless life. Sartre catches this point as precise as Marcel does, but he advocates the idea that it is despair that forms man's genuine action, not hope. Unlike Sartre, Marcel thinks that despair is simple and clear: in our view, everything in our life is dependent only on our want or dependent on our estimations and calculations.

The real problem, to which Marcel's call to hope and Sartre's appeal for despair are diametrically opposed answers, is whether solitude is the last word. The case for hope rests with intersubjectivity, with love, and ultimately with faith (Keen 1966, 42).

Life has always been mysterious for man, giving him a range of physical opportunities. Hope is something that can save man and give him an absolute blessing helping him overcome every obstacle. Hope makes man move and move. A hopeful man is the one who keeps moving and never thinks of stopping. Hope is beyond our definition (Zalta 2014, 8).

Now we can make a distinction between "being hopeful" and "having hope in something," just like the distinction between "being

faithful” and “having faith in something.” A true hope is quite different from having hope in something particular (e.g., having hope in something to happen or having hope in reaching our goals). Hoping to be saved is a prime example of a true hope.

That absolute (true) hope can remain open or not is not merely on the basis that we know the nature of the salvation that we hope for. It is beyond mere forecast; it is getting rid of expectations and calculations. There is no common point between hope and expectations or calculations in everyday life. Hope is knowledge of what directs us to disappointment. In this sense, hope is not against fear, because it is originally a means by which we can overcome fear and be revived. As can be seen, defining hope is highly complicated.

Hope and other spiritual realities cannot be confirmed or denied, because they are beyond the objective world. Hope is not like expectation, which can be precisely understood by objective proofs. The subject of our expectation is something objective that we try to secure. In addition, in expectation, unlike hope, we forecast what we want and try to fulfill it.

No doubt, it is possible to have a personal interpretation of hope. Why not thinking that hope is a wishful longing for escaping the bitter consequences of our past experiences. It must be accepted that such an interpretation cannot be denied.

Our world comprises of both material and spiritual aspects, and hope belongs to the spiritual aspect. It is not that if we failed in the material aspect, we would necessarily fail in the spiritual aspect too. Hope goes with happiness and happiness goes with hope. These are miracles. Hope is beyond our joy or misery and cannot be figured out by material means. This is the very mysterious characteristic of hope.

Hope is possible only when we believe in miracles. A world dominated by technology inevitably surrenders to wishes and fears, as every means ends up serving fears or wishes. It may be a characteristic of hope that it does not need the assistance of means. Hope is something which is needed for everyone who fails to have means. It is the secret side of hope.

On analyzing the question closely, we find that the nature of hope is very hard to define. I will take two examples: to hope for the recovery from illness or for the conversion of a person dear to us, and to hope for the liberation of one's oppressed country. The hope here is for something which, according to the order of nature, does not depend upon us (it is absolutely outside the zone where stoicism can be practiced). At the root of the hope is the consciousness of a state of things which invites us to despair (illness, damnation, etc.). (Marcel 1949, 74)

We think of hope mainly as the preparedness of a soul that has experienced participation in such a profound way that it can, despite its own will and knowledge, perform a transcendence-seeking action—that is, the action of consolidating the vital reconstruction that this experience is both its preliminary and its first result. Hope is a strong spiritual quality that inspires new spirits to our life. Its effect is by no means limited to material life, and thus it is not fair to compare it with the effectiveness of technology, because with hope we are no longer tied to common natural rules. Hope's merit lies in the fact that it directs us beyond material means and physical instruments.

Great problems arise when hope is interpreted with the language of experience and rules, for hope's language and its effect are metaphysical, and claiming that it can be challenged by the technique is nonsense. Today's skepticism towards hope originates from a great failure to understand that nothing is effective when there is no power.

Is it not clear that the efficacy of hope, in some cases, lies in its disarming value? In the case of on-resistance at least, this is quite

intelligible. If I oppose violence, that is, if I put myself on the same ground as violence, it is quite certain that I tend to keep it up and thereby even to reinforce it; in this sense it is true to say that all combat implies a sort of fundamental connivance between the two sides, a common will for the battle to go on; this state of affairs does not end until they reach the point where it becomes radically impossible to treat war as if it were a game, and the will to destroy takes its place; and this will lets loose an opposite (i.e. an identical) will on the other side. (Marcel 1949, 77)

According to Marcel's Existentialism, morality is a process which can be attained by hope, which replaces fear, isolation, and misery, and a means that can establish mental contact among men. In order to be hopeful and keep our mental contact with other souls and pass from limited to an unlimited world, we have no choice but to quit selfishness. As long as man is drowned in his selfishness, he cannot experience hope in himself. We must curb our ever-increasing hunger for gaining material properties. Deliberation on hope is likely the most direct way to understand "excellence," for it is jumping into a deeper world.

Excellence cannot be understood merely by science and philosophy; rather, it can be understood by hope and experiencing, and hence we are unable to put our personal experiences into words to share them with others. In sum, Marcel seems to believe that existence must not be looked at only with a material-based view, because it is a matter of secret, not a matter of materials.

Although trust may never find a conceptual side, it can by itself contribute in making love-based life possible. It is participation in the improvement of existence that makes man a joyful, free lover who works hard in his material life. It is such participation that helps love and hope come together in man, signified as "Thou" in the other world. A "we" or a spiritual communication remains to help love and hope come together, enabling the soul to search in experiences for proofs to

persuade that they will exist and come together in future. This idea has its roots in a secret presence, which is nothing but participation in existence. We cannot perceive hope, free will, and other such spiritual concepts through theoretical reasoning (Marcel 1961, 11).

In the first place, hope is limited to our level. We ought not to confuse ambition with hope. Hope rises where one's soul gains the ability to go beyond limitations. Hope is a knowledge that we should acquire. It has a close link with the soul, for which hope is like breathing. Without hope, the soul turns miserable and begins to die. The soul moves in hope, and having movement is the meaning of "being," a meaning that psychologists have understood well. One who depends himself on hope sees himself an Absolute Thou, who is all-present. In this sense, he sacrifices his self. An individual who commits suicide is drowned into selfishness and thus is not able to meet the Absolute Thou (Copleston 1993, 333). No sacrifice is possible without hope; without hope, sacrifice is equal to suicide. True that when I have hope there is no reluctance, but this hope centers on an order or a cause only when I give up myself for it.

Hope is far from optimism, because in optimism may fail. You may be optimistic about something, but it may turn out bad. Pessimism stands against optimism and contradicts it; however, at the opposing side of hope stands disappointment, but they do not contradict each other, because at the very point where man faces disappointment, hope arises and asserts itself. The same circumstances that cause disappointment can cause hope as well. Hope is far from being a mere feeling; rather, it is a meaning; while optimism is merely a feeling that involves reason. Put another way, optimism is a sort of enthusiasm about oneself.

Hope is part of our existence with direct link to other parts of existence such as love, faith, and righteousness. Absolute hope is that which you have in God, who is believed to have love for all His creatures. Similarly, human society stands on the basis of hope, faith, and love.

One must integrate faith and hope together with righteous deeds and love. Love encompasses faith in the beloved's eternity and absolute power. Man can love only the one whom he can believe. Hope and faith in the Absolute Power are central points of existence. Hope contains in itself love and goodwill, as there is no selfishness in hope and that is why hope can make human society survive. Hope is unconditional faith in the Absolute Power, who has created all humans, loves them all, and wishes them to attain righteousness and salvation. It must be reminded that the world community is not a mathematical set or unit, for we use mathematical sets for individuals and assume them as objects. But this rule is universal; it is a multi-voice world in which all humans are respected and appreciated. A society which loses hope begins to be severed from the world community and becomes pessimistic about the others. Although it may have everything it could wish, it will be devoid of spirits and cannot have an active participation (Anderson 2006, 175).

Conclusion

According to Marcel, the problem of human beings is the loss of the ontological weight of human experience. We live in a broken world which leads us to despair and nihilism. One of the chief tasks of philosophy is to explore areas of human experience, including hope.

As Marcel states, we find the nature of hope difficult to define. We can only describe it. To illustrate the concept of hope we must consider the distinction between "being" and "having." Man has two types of existence, being and having, by which he establishes relationship with

existence, making fundamental differences in understanding the world, and hope is in connection with being.

True hope is something that we cannot estimate, as it never depreciates and it can be a source of pleasure. Hope is possible only when miracles are possible. Hope in redemption is a model for all other hopes, and is defined in Christian faith as the hope for getting close to God and being with Him.

In hope we rely, but not because we are afraid. In many situations we may be hopeful or hopeless, but even in the depth of hopelessness there is hope. Hopefulness and hopelessness are inextricably linked with each other, and we humans are between these two, though the world tends to lead us to hopelessness. If there was no hopelessness, achieving hopefulness would be impossible. According to Marcel, disappointment has its root in the notion that there is nothing in the world on which we can rely and there is no guarantee for our successes.

According to Marcel, a hopeful individual says about the incurable illness of her or his loved one that it is impossible that the world remains reluctant to treat this illness. There is a saving force at the end. I can never surrender to disappointment. There are things that work in the world beyond any estimations or expectations that we have in our material everyday life. I do not wish, but I assert this with the prophetic resonance of true hope.

Hope is inherently characterized by keeping off negative and discouraging notions. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the connection between hope and disappointment continues forever and they will never get separated from each other. We live in a world that disappointment is absolutely possible and man is even tempted to be disappointed, but hope can emerge only in such a context and save man from being defeated.

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