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The Discourse of Hope

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RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HOPE: PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE PANDEMIC-FORCED RETURN TO SOCIALITY

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Abstract
The subjective, intersubjective, and mystical or theological dimensions of hope have puzzled philosophers for centuries. Nevertheless, hope rarely seems to be the central matter. The inclination is rather to judge it morally, as positive or negative, and then nourish previously taken metaphysical stances with the writings emerging from these positions. In Husserlian phenomenology and discourses derived from it that tend to be less judgmental and more descriptive, hope is studied as a complex intentional act engaging consciousness of time, affectivity, and alterity, to later be compared to similar intentional modalities, like protention, desire and expectation. In this article, I propose to focus on intersubjectivity, by drafting a social phenomenology of hope.
Key-words: *standard account of hope, hope, phenomenology, intersubjectivity, moral emotions.*

Introduction: the standard account

Defined as desire, belief, emotion or a mental-framing skill, as only human or also concerning other animals, hope is crucial in our daily lives. Its key role in motivation and a meaningful existence, recognized since antiquity, prompted it to be recurrently studied, assessed, and shaped, according to the goals of the analysis at hand, be it therapeutic, political, or religious. Today, the discussion on hope develops around the *Standard Account*, a term introduced in 2009 by Ariel Meirav to name the predominant and insufficient conception of hope as desire and probability (Meirav, 2009: 217). This label impregnated the debate as a starting point and a common enemy (see Brei, 2015; Blöser & Stahl, 2020; Stockdale, 2021). Trying to reduce hope to a combination of mental states or to declare it an irreducible one, these analytical accounts typically consider uncertainty as a third factor: what is hoped for is always uncertain. Looking for a clear definition, these analyses refer to terms lacking one themselves like emotion, desire and belief, and they do not account for personality, culture or education, which are the determinants of the frequency, intensity, expression and sharing modalities of hope.

I consider it better to approach hope not as a notion we should unambiguously define to defend or reject it, but as a set of phenomena and a polysemic concept offering its multiple meanings and uses through the texts that

thematize it and through the unforceful meditations we can make on our own and shared hopeful and hoping experiences. Let us focus less on how authors reacted to certain specific and restrictive interpretations of hope, less on their positions on its value - or lack thereof- and more on their descriptions, our main aim being to understand what hope can do for us in a pandemic world. For this, at first, I will make succinct descriptions of hope in ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary Western philosophy. Then, I will go over the phenomenology of hope. And, finally, I will reflect upon the tools a social phenomenology offers.

1. Concepts of hope

Three concepts of hope iterate through the centuries: theological/mystical hope, defined as a relationship with a divinity or an absolute being, psychological hope, defined as a subjective state, and sociological hope, defined as a collective phenomenon, determining political and social processes. A fourth important concept is existential, but -as seen below- I consider this to be a reformulation of mystical hope.

Usually considered as an optimistic disposition only toward the future, hope is most interesting when seen as a complex temporal experience. This was already the case in the *Philebus*, where it is deemed a pleasure of memory (Plato, 1892: 606, 36b) by which the hopeful (*ἐλπίζων*) attenuate difficulties: remembering better times helps us see the end of a painful present. Hope is the structure of subjective recalibration through which we perform uplifting changes to present perceptions and expectations in virtue of an input, *viz.* positive memories.

Aristotelian writings display the following: a. the above-mentioned restrictive understanding of hope as relating only to the future, b. the clear predilection for the present and presence-presenting faculties like perception over faculties like hope, presenting merely hoped-for upcoming events, and c. the difference between hope as mere expectation of good or bad things, and as affective engagement with only positive outcomes.

Aristotle also deals with the morality side, differentiating unvirtuous hope from the hope of the truly brave. The 3rd book of his *Nicomachean Ethics* states that, for different reasons, the brave and the hopeful act similarly. Hope is, indeed, one of five behaviors that look like courage but are named so wrongly: civic courage, military courage, courage by ignorance, courage by hope (*κατ' ελπίδα*, due to past experiences or intoxication), and euphoric courage (Aristotle, 1935: 315). Real courage comes only from internal principles. Yet, the philosopher sees another kind of hope which always accompanies virtue and that is more than false courage (503).

In his treatise on memory, he establishes that the soul relates to time only through three faculties: perception of the present, hope for the future and memory of the past: "*τοῦ μὲν παρόντος αἴσθησις, τοῦ δὲ μέλλοντος ἐλπίς, τοῦ δὲ γενομένου μνήμη*" (Bloch, 2007: 26). Translated usually as *expectation*, the ancient term *ἐλπίς* / *ελπίδα* can be understood as proper hope (Beekes & Van Beek, 2010: 415), *viz.* not mere anticipation of good or bad things but only of positive outcomes. Aristotle uses this term again in the *Lambda* book of *Metaphysics*, stating that our hopes and recollections (*ἐλπίδες καὶ μνῆμαι*) are only secondary pleasures compared to the

enjoyment (*ἡδονὴ*) of presenting faculties, *viz.* wakefulness, perception and thought (*ἐγρήγορσις*, *αἴσθησις*, *νόησις*). This hierarchy of pleasures and faculties is founded on the eternal movement of the single unmovable first mover (*τὸ πρῶτον κινοῦν ἀκίνητον ὄν*), viewed as joyful, all in one, all action, and all present (Aristotle, 1998: 374).

If human beings can access the secondary enjoyments of memory and hope, as well as the supreme joy of reason, is because of what is, in a sense, divine in them, *viz.* thought, reason, the movement of intellection that resembles the movement of the unmovable being. Understanding this, the metaphysical grounds of these hierarchies of pleasures, faculties and time modalities, helps us indirectly see the importance of hope, as the most distinctive grasp on the future.

Western theology continues to thematize hope in the context of what is thought to be essentially human as an analogical resemblance to, not only a supreme being, but a personal God. Theology relies on hope to keep the bond between the followers of a religion and its narrative. Hope is involved in the adherence of believers to a set of foundational expected promises, like life after death. It is a daily reminder of an upcoming blissful reality, lived as guaranteed thanks to faith, that fuels everyday actions: hope is the practical face of faith.

For Christian theology, hope is habit and passion. Aquinas indicates that, as habit, it is one of the three theological virtues (together with charity and love), i.e., one of the most important for a good life and for achieving salvation. As a passion, it is an irascible inclination toward perceived goods (Miner, 2009: 25). These goods are difficult, located in the future and possible to obtain (62). Disregarding the dogma, let us keep in mind the idea that the daily passion of hope can lead to the habit of hope: hopefulness can be practiced and can promote virtuous action.

As secularization grows, this practical role of hope in the construction of virtuous habits fades, leaving behind only hope as a passion. Reduced to an emotional state, hope is judged negatively by nihilists or positively by utopists, but in any case, always seen as taking no part in the construction of the subject. If the mystical or theological concept of hope highlights its role in giving teleological unity, meaning and moral consistency to the person, the subjective concept makes of it a peripheral emotional reaction, considered useful or not depending on the goals of the analysis at hand. This reduction of hope is what brings us to the semantic discussions around the aforementioned *Standard Account* we are in nowadays. This subjective concept of hope is already clearly articulated by Descartes (Descartes, 1989: 110) and the philosophers of the Enlightenment (Hobbes, 2017: 53; Locke, 1853: 145; Spinoza, 2018: 110; Hume, 1960: 444). Beyond deciding if hope is reliable or friable, and beyond each author's emphasis - like Spinoza stressing its inconstancy, or Hume its dependence on probability estimations-, the shared idea is that it implies desire and the assessment of possibility.

Finally, the sociological or political concept of hope became a central theme during the 20th century. After traditional dogmatisms started falling and social progress was considered a possibility outside any ontological, messianic, Hegelian, or otherwise deterministic paradigm, hope was able to reappear as a creative expectation that not only counteracts negative emotions but gives direction to our

actions and sustains them over time. The most representative author in this respect is Ernst Bloch, for whom hope is an emotion and intentional content grounded in the human drive for happiness, an unyielding and relentless motor of history. As an emotion, hope is an expectation that extinguishes anxiety and despair, and, unlike optimism, cannot be dented by experience or dissuasion. Bloch confronts existentialism, where death is fundamental: "instead, hope has projected itself precisely at the place of death" (Bloch, 1995: 112).

Existentialism, indeed, sees hope as a relationship to the absolute, seen either as the divine or as the absurd (Fremstedal, 2012: 52; Camus, 1979: 35). It focuses on how essential this authentic hope, this link to a supreme reality conceived as truth, is to humans and how it differs from daily hope. The most exemplary author in this vein is Søren Kierkegaard, who showed that hope, as relation to the future, might refer to completely different phenomena in different metaphysical contexts, according to what they define as the future and as the determinants of reality. If the future is death and nothing more, hope can only put us in relation with what is humanly possible and susceptible of taking place during our lives. If the future is conceived as involving some kind of life after death, as it does for the believer, hope refers to a different metaphysical paradigm and an entirely different idea of possibility.

> Generally, it is thought that there is a certain age that is especially rich in hope […] this, however, is merely a human manner of speaking that does not get at the truth; all this hope and all this despair are neither authentic hope nor authentic despair. What is decisive is that *with God everything is possible.* […] the critical decision does not come until a person is brought to his extremity, when, humanly speaking, there is no possibility. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will *believe*. But this is the very formula for losing the understanding; to believe is indeed to lose the understanding in order to gain God (Kierkegaard, 1980: 38).

What are the similarities and differences between hoping in the realm of ordinary possibilities and hoping in the extended realm of possibilities that believing in an omnipotent divinity opens? Do these differences in the content and context of hope point to different phenomena or should they be considered mere flavors of the act of hoping? For the moment let us reflect on this difference between earthly and existential hope (the one we can acquire when, contemplating death, we surrender understanding in virtue of the absolute), for it reappears in a new, secular way, in today's discussion (see Van den Heuvel et al., 2020: 101).

Closer to transcendence than to life, existential hope appears when considering existence at its most liminal states, specially when considering the shared certainty of death. In Heideggerian thought, grounded as it is on the concern for one's own death, "hoping is opening a relation to the beyond, where the unhoped-for might appear" (Mitchell, 2015: 253). Phenomenology can be seen as opposite to this view, for it focuses primarily on ordinary experience, even if altered

states and the unusual are in its scope and regarded as important. Yet, it also emphasizes openness, in a sense that we now clarify.

2. A phenomenology of hope

The term *phenomenology* has medical and philosophical meanings. Etymologically signifying the study (*logos*) of what appears (*phainomai*, *to appear*), this term usually refers to subjective descriptions (Venes, 2021). The *phenomenology of hope* then simply calls for descriptions of individual experiences of hope, with no precisions about their presuppositions or method. Yet, *phenomenology* has been chosen by many authors to name their strategies of philosophical enquiry, their systems, or a part of them. This is how there is a *phenomenology of hope* in the works of Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Buber, Sartre, Ricœur or Levinas, and this is also how they all greatly differ.

Here I consider the phenomenology of hope we can gather and expand on from Husserl's writings, which constitute the ground of today's connotations of the term. Husserl invites us to do a methodical meditation on our experience, the method being *epoché*, *viz.* a persistent interruption of our thought habits and metaphysical assumptions. This allows to put experience at a comfortable distance and follow it without being involved in it[11]. The results he got from this method are the canon of phenomenology, consisting of a series of insights about -mainly individual- consciousness. The first insight is, indeed, the *ego* and its temporal flux, constantly changing, with intentionalities emerging and disappearing endlessly, but still with a clear form: that of a constant river of retentions and protections unified by a subtle phase, a slight veil, itself flowing and shifting, that we call the present moment (Husserl, 1982: 179; 1960: 75). In this model, hope, like all grasps of the past or the future, is relevant, but given the number of such relations, specific accounts of hope are almost inexistent.

Husserlian expositions are systematic and constructive, they privilege elemental forms over intricate ones. Thus, many accounts are given of the rudimentary intentionalities of protention and retention, as well as of the more complex ones of memory and expectation (1982: 175), but not of nostalgia or hope, for example. These kinds of experiences imply multiple intentionalities and regions of consciousness.

In a Kantian gesture, Husserl tries to tame the entangled, moving net of ever emerging intentionalities, separating theorizing acts (investigating, explicating and

[11] The term *following* is key here: meditated-upon experience cannot be grasped as objects are, and, in fact, it is altered. The following attention is slower than the followed consciousness and all the things usually lost in remembering are here also lost, depending on time, intensity of affection and recollection effort, as any other memory. A word should be said about the term *effort* for meditation is a particular form of memorial attention, even when it focuses in current experiences, that depends on what we might call an *allowing* quality, a kind of patient letting-come to memory, letting-come to the forefront of our mind's eye. Nevertheless, even if meditation is less submitted to our will than ordinary external perception, it is still privileged for it is ours. Paraphrasing Husserl, we can say that there are no appearances when exploring inner life (1982: 96).

conceptualizing, comparing and distinguishing, collecting and counting, presupposing and inferring), from emotion (liking and disliking, being glad and being sorry, desiring and shunning, hoping and fearing) and will (deciding and acting) (Husserl, 1982: 54). This translates into three subjective attitudes: theoretical, axiological and practical (1989: 4).

In this frame, as an activity pertaining mainly to the axiological attitude, phenomenology can address hope:

a. As singular intentionality, analyzing it, like any other, in a bilateral way, asking how the act is appearing and how its object is appearing (in this case, the hoping and the hoped-for). In technical terms, this is an exploration of noesis and noema that covers the questions: is it a positing act or not, empty or non-empty, how could it be fulfilled, how is it disappointed, and what characterizes the givenness of the hoped for.

b. As a compound, dissecting it in a constitutional analysis of the intentionalities implied and their flowing arrangement.

Hope is a position-taking (Husserl, 2005: 460), *viz.* a subjective operation based on multiple theorizing[12], perceptual, retentional, phantasy and anticipatory acts, bearing major consequences on the sphere of action. It implies knowledge (perceptive, memorial and presumptive), not only of what we hope for but also -in order to constitute it- of the world and ourselves. If one of the fundamental Kantian questions is *what I am permitted to hope for,* phenomenology asks *what we actually hope for, why* and *how*, answering each one of these questions, not with ontological presuppositions but only in terms of the active and passive performances of consciousness.

Feeling hopeful and the act of hoping are eloquent: they talk not only of what we believe we are capable of and is possible, but also of what we expect beyond the coherence of the world, and how, therefore, our experience expands -at least presumptively- to transcendence.

Although differing from some Husserlian claims, the most significant work in this respect has been done by Anthony J. Steinbock, who defines hope as a moral emotion of possibility, consisting in a sustainable and patient awaiting-enduringly (Steinbock, 2014: 160-184, 2018a: 19; 2018b: 18). Moral emotions arise in and reveal something about interpersonal bonds. They are of three kinds: a. emotions of self-givenness, clearly demarcating the *ego* (pride, shame, and guilt). b. emotions of possibility, opening us to something other than ourselves or our past (repentance, hope, and despair). c. emotions of otherness, where the relation to another is explicit (trust, love and humility).

In the 5th chapter of his *Moral Emotions*, Steinbock compares hope to several similar intentionalities. Compared to the future-binding acts of protention and expectation, hope is active not passive, personal not anonymous, a kind of *awaiting* not a *waiting for*, differing from expectation for it is not in the realm of probabilities but of possibilities. Compared with other possibility acts like

[12] Here, *theorizing* never refers to mere intellect, for in every intentionality there are bodily inputs from the kinesthetic system we form in a shared living space with other subjects and objects.

imagination and wish, hope's possibility is personally engaging, not arbitrary. Compared with other personally engaging acts, such as nostalgia and desire, hope opens the subject to alterity, to an exterior force. Finally, compared to denial and despair, while despair leaves it unchanged, hope transforms our experience of impossibility, allowing us to see beyond what is. In this, it is like denial for it does not stays in the present. But Steinbock reminds us that hope renders palpable something considered extremely improbable or even miraculous without the need to refuse reality or the current state we are in.

Hope is, indeed, the curious state where we simultaneously overcome and let the present be. We bear with it but in that same emotion that allows us to see it, to accept it, we go beyond.

3. Final remarks: a social phenomenology of hope for pandemic times

As pointed out by Judith Butler, *pandemic* refers to all (*pan*) the people (*demos*), people everywhere and something that touches everyone (Butler, 2021). Like nothing before, the experience we have shared over the last months of collective change, uncertainty, stress and fear, close and distant sickness, death and grief, deep ethical dilemmas and bolder state control, has shown us more poignantly social inequalities, our interconnectedness, and our utter interdependence. We have faced loneliness together and seen, even if we might be forgetting it, how it altered time, changing us and our whole living experience.

We have understood the invisible but all-the-more-present responsibility we have regarding the life of others, seeing that we share not only the earth but the air: we breathe in what other humans, animals and plants breathe out, and even if our trajectories diverge, even if we are born and die at different points, our lives mingle in a single biosphere, with their many memories and many futures.

We should take advantage of this inflexion point in social history. Beyond idealist and dystopian reactions to what is, beyond the deluded optimism or despair we might have as reactions to it, there is hope in redirecting our awareness and efforts to sociality. This can look like what Butler calls public humanities: academia integrating the communities it depends on and it affects, "making a new path toward a more just and reflective society" (2020: 487). This can also be a phenomenology centered on shared experiences that link and open us to one another, just as hope does.

At the end of his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl affirms: "the intrinsically first being, the being that precedes and bears every worldly objectivity, is transcendental intersubjectivity" (Husserl, 1960: 156). Egology or the study of the ego and intentional analysis are only the first examinations developed from a phenomenological standpoint but, in further inquiry, "the illusion of a solipsism is dissolved" (150). Social phenomenology appears then, showing how every intentionality constituting objects, our own subjectivity, others as subjects and the world, comes from interpersonal relationships where no intentional link has yet formed.

This is the dimension pointed at by Emmanuel Levinas, when he refers to "sociality, an order to which finite truth -being and consciousness- are subordinate" (Levinas, 1991: 26). Sociality or the sensitive and sensible web we are in with one

another, take place before consciousness itself: "subjectivity is the other in the same […] This is not the correlation characteristic of intentionality, nor even that of dialogue, which attests to essence by its essential reciprocity" (25).

With the term sociality, Levinas tries to point toward another kind of intersubjectivity. There is, indeed, the intersubjectivity of intentional subjects that interact or enter a reciprocal dialogue. In this worldly intersubjectivity, subjects perceive one another as more than objects, as living bodies analogous to each other. The persons we communicate with constitute their own perceptual fields and, in that intentional arraying, they co-constitute with us what is understood to be the common world. Levinas takes us to a kind of intersubjectivity that precedes this, where there is only the ethical and sensible relation between the same and the other, forming rudimentary subjectivities that will later become intentional subjects.

In this context, Levinas conceives hope as a different phenomenon in each of these two kinds of intersubjectivity. Hope is, indeed, an intentional modality, an emotional shape of consciousness that constitutes and colors up time and experience, a shape where alterity is objectified and reduced as in any other form of intentionality (Levinas, 1987: 62). But hope is also a pre-intentional "relationship with something beyond-measure" (2000: 65), to something sacred, may it be another person or divinity. Here it would be interesting to elaborate on how hope varies in different phenomenologies, determined by the death of the other like Levinasian philosophy, or by our own death, like Heideggerian philosophy. We cannot address this question here, but it is important to highlight that the phenomenology of hope focuses on alterity, on the unhoped-for, on that which goes beyond the constituted world of the subject but still appears in the act of hoping itself.

Even if Husserl and Levinas point toward a much more radical, not-yet-firmly-constituted -for Husserl intentional, for Levinas preintentional- sociality, Steinbock's account is similar: we always hope by counting on something other than ourselves. This is what he calls *sustainability*: we sustain our hopes only by counting on alterity, be it natural, sacred or intersubjective.

In this social phenomenology that sees isolated subjectivity as a mere expression, a face of sociality, we still need to practice *epoché*. We still need to try to observe our lived experience, not imposing over it the form we read or thought it should have. Hope can therefore be intentional or not, be only about the future or not. Phenomenology should allow us to reflect in this manner, distinguishing different acts without reducing them to a single norm nor to a simple subjective state. We should be able to bear with and understand the differences between hopes strongly linked to our actions, like hoping to get a job, hopes of uncontrollability, like hoping it will not be too cold today, hopes of quasi-impossibility, like hoping nobody would ever suffer, religious hopes, like hoping there is a happy non-worldly life after death, and other types of hope.

And this in a non-dogmatic context for phenomenology, before being a science of consciousness, is the meditation resulting from *epoché*. Before being a specific theory, phenomenology is an interruptive method that should allow us to create a space of reflection where metaphysical paradigms and presuppositions appear as such, as the cultural phenomenon they are. Following Kierkegaard's

intuition, the phenomenological method should be particularly able to show how different notions and feelings of hope emerge from different belief systems.

In my reflection, hopes, almost inadvertently and endlessly emerging, appear, certainly, as emotional states at the intentional level, but they seem to also have a major role at the level of preintentional sociality. Here, hopes of the shape "I hope he didn't suffer", "I hope this was not the case", or "I hope this was the case", *viz.* hopes of the past that will never be confirmed or contradicted, hopes that won't have closure and are not relating to any future, as well as hopes of a future exceeding all subjective anticipation (Abensour, 2010), appear as fundamental. In a not completely anonymous but precarious, fleeting, ethical inter-subjectivation at this preintentional level, these kinds of hope contribute as affective strands of the constitution of time, the ego, and subsequent instances. A paradox arises then for hope depends on metaphysical beliefs and culture, but, from a phenomenological standpoint, it also appears, along with other ethical or sensible relations to the Other, as constituting consciousness from its most basic levels, from time onwards.

Unable to address this here, I have tried to show in this text that, since the dawn of philosophy, the practical and conceptual potential of hope has been reduced by two ideas: that it is a pleasure and that it comes from the Gods or from what makes us superior to other forms of life. This has caused hope to be the object of an ambivalent attitude, the same we generally have concerning pleasure (taking it to be demonic or liberating), and to depend on broader metaphysical assumptions that make it difficult to access the raw experience of hope. Trying to grasp this experience from the perspective of a social phenomenology, I still wanted to bring back teachings I consider relevant: the Platonic idea that in hope we can change our perception, restructure our present and build our future, the Thomistic idea that it is something we can practice, bringing us to change our behaviors for the better, or the Blochian idea that hope allows us to overcome negative emotions by giving direction and durability to our political actions.

When facing uncertainty, pain and grief, I would not say we can always choose to be hopeful nor advocate for an inflated sense of free deliberation that can too easily backfire. I will instead say that we have concurring reactions and we can cultivate those more surely conducting to a sense of security and well-being. We react with fear, anxiety, despair but also hope, and when joy is still too distant, we can amplify the little hope we have by focusing on it. Our experience and actions can be enhanced if we pay attention to the persistence of hope, to how it opens us to alterity, brings us back to our interdependence, expands our awareness of what is possible letting us almost touch the impossible, and -contrary to fear- stimulates our curiosity, multiply our movements, attempts and explorations without denying the present. Hope offers a middle point between acceptance and denial, between arbitrary imagination, escapism, wishful thinking, illusory control, and vain manipulation. It captures the sheer essence of experience in a soothing light: it is the brilliant and so ancient insight that this moment is already gone, that there is always more, that nothing is definitive, and that this uncertainty also means that something better is possible.

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